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## Collaborative Work Environments: Development and Sustainability

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Graduate Program in Education

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Education

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines how elementary principals develop collaborative work environments. Specifically, it explores how principals understand collaborative work, examines the strategies principals employ to encourage such an environment, the supports principals use when developing collaborative work environments and the challenges principals experience when trying to create one in his or her school. The study was conducted using a qualitative research design and an interpretivist approach was used to frame the research. Eleven elementary principals were interviewed for this study. The interviews were semi-structured and ranged in length from 45-60 minutes.

Findings included an important emphasis on positive relationship building amongst teachers and the school principal in order to develop trust, the use of a distributed style of school leadership, the importance of communication and the significance of developing a positive school culture. Principals shared the supports that assisted them in developing collaborative working environments, such as monetary and staffing resources from the district school board, moral support from other principals and effective working relationships with their teacher union representatives. Challenges to the creation of a collaborative work environment included a lack of time and funding, staff members who were unwilling to work in a collaborative manner, as well as challenges that occur outside the school such as parental and union involvement.

The implementation of a collaborative working environment in elementary schools could result in a reduced workload for both principals and teachers. This would be accomplished through the sharing of responsibilities amongst the staff.

**Keywords: elementary principals; collaboration; leadership; school culture; Ontario**

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## **Collaborative Work Environments: Development and Sustainability**

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

No two schools function in exactly the same way. Not only are there a variety of procedures that go into the day to day running of a school, but the work environment varies. There are many influences that go into determining why a school operates the way it does. One of the most important determinants of this variation is the school principal (Minckler, 2014).

The principal has an important role to play in developing a collaborative work environment amongst his or her staff (Sindhi, 2013; McLeskey & Waldron, 2010). The principal has the opportunity to set the tone of the school through his or her leadership (Kohm & Nance, 2009). The actions of the principal can be the most important factor in determining if the school environment is a collaborative working one (McLeskey & Waldron, 2010; Rhodes, Stevens & Hemmings, 2011). Collaboration requires effective and appropriate support from leadership (Patel, Pettit & Wilson, 2012). The development of a collaborative work environment requires knowledge on the part of the principal regarding the concept and how to allow for teacher leadership in his or her school (Mangin, 2007). A collaborative culture is very hard to develop and sustain in the absence of supportive leadership from school administration (Leithwood & McAdie, 2007).

### **Collaborative Work Environment**

When people are working collaboratively they are interacting with each other, working towards common goals (Patel, Pettit & Wilson, 2012). While working cooperatively is an important aspect of collaboration, it is actually a prerequisite to working collaboratively, as collaboration is more complex. In collaborative work environments people are not simply

working together, but they have equal roles and power is evenly distributed among the participants (Henderson, 1996).

The term distributive work environment could be used as well to describe such an environment, as many aspects of the running of the school on a daily basis have been distributed amongst the teaching staff. When a school is collaborative there is an emphasis on structures and processes that foster shared commitment to achieving goals as well as shared accountability among staff members and collaborative decision making is the norm (Heck & Hallinger, 2010). In order for a collaborative work environment to exist, the principal must be open to sharing leadership and decision making (Goddard, Goddard & Tschannen-Moran, 2007).

In a collaborative work environment, shared decision making amongst the staff is key. Decisions are not made by a single individual, but they emerge from collaborative dialogues between many (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson & Myers, 2007). Ideally decisions are arrived at by consensus, after much discussion and seeking input from the experts who are involved. Principals in schools with collaborative work environments empower all school personnel to share responsibility for decision making (McLeskey & Waldron, 2010). Having this practice of shared decision making makes the time that the teachers have to work together more productive, as they have agreed on a common purpose for the use of the available time (Irwin & Farr, 2004).

Collaborative schools are ones where teachers are guided by a common purpose and have a broad agreement on educational values (Gruenert, 2005; Turning Points, 2001; Peterson & Deal, 1998). The primary goal of a collaborative school is effective teaching and learning. Teachers and administrators work together in collaborative work environments to achieve this goal (Scott & Smith, 1987). Teachers working in a collaborative working environment feel as though they are part of a team (Allensworth, 2012). Learning amongst the teaching staff occurs



both from and with each other when teachers work as a team (Fullan, 2014). Schools that are collaborative work environments have developed core goals and values as a group and share decision making (Peterson & Deal, 1998; Crum, Sherman & Myran, 2010). These collaborative schools also share leadership amongst the staff (Mulford, 2008; Coleman, 2011).

It is important to note that the phrase “collaborative work environment” was chosen specifically because this study explores the principals’ understandings of collaborative work environments. It considers the ways in which principals develop and sustain collaborative work environments as well as the benefits and challenges to collaborative work environments in schools.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the role elementary principals in Ontario play in the development and continued growth of collaborative work environments. The study explores how principals understand the collaborative work environment. It also examines the strategies principals use to assist in the creation of collaborative work environments in their schools. The study explores the challenges that principals face when working with their staff to create collaborative work environments in their schools. The research attempts to understand some of the reasons why a school may not be operating as a collaborative work environment. As stated earlier, each worksite is different and therefore the reasons for a lack of collaboration may vary between schools.

By learning ways in which elementary principals can develop and sustain collaborative work environments in their schools, I hope to share these strategies, to ensure better working conditions for my colleagues. The results of this study may also include contributions to the

existing literature on the topic of collaborative working environments in schools. It may assist principals to develop strategies to improve collaboration in their schools, as well as offer suggestions regarding avenues of support and ways to overcome the challenges that they may face in the development of such an environment. Finally, the information gained from this research study, will perhaps also improve the collaborative work environment that exists in my own school building. It may allow me to improve my own working environment.

If a school is not operating as a collaborative work environment, I would like to understand why this is, what are the challenges that the school is facing, and what supports can be offered to help in the development of a collaborative work environment. I hope to be able to learn and put into practice ways in which I can personally assist my own principal in the development and sustainability of our school's collaborative work environment.

### **Positionality**

My interest in the development of collaborative work environments and the ways in which principals can encourage and sustain them, evolved from my work within my Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) Local over the last decade. I have been heavily involved in my ETFO Local, having held every elected position, with the exception of President. Due to my extensive work experience with ETFO, I see the union as a viable partner in the work of developing collaborative work environments in schools. Others whose experiences differ, may not view this issue in the same way.

This work within the Local culminated in my previous role as a released union officer (Vice-President) for the Local. As a released officer it was my job to act as a resource for the over 1300 members of my Local, assist teachers who were in difficulty, liaise with senior

administration at the board office on a variety of issues, and work collaboratively with the provincial ETFO organization. On a day to day basis, in that role, my Local ETFO colleagues and I worked to problem solve situations when such a work environment did not exist at a given school or worksite.

The lack of collaboration may have been between an administrator and a teacher or, as often occurs, between teacher colleagues. While I always encouraged teachers to work collaboratively in all situations, it is the principal who has the authority, both from a positional and a legal standpoint, to create the conditions for the teachers on their staff to work in a collaborative environment. Although I have now returned to the classroom, how to create such an environment and the need to understand how to sustain it, continues to be a focus of mine. My work continues in a lesser role in my ETFO Local, and I would like to be able to assist colleagues in improving their working conditions, even if in a smaller way.

### **Assumptions**

Certain assumptions were made in the completion of this research study. This study began with the idea that one of the most important determinants regarding whether or not the working environment was collaborative was the principal (Minckler, 2014) and that principals have an important role to play in developing collaborative working environments in schools (Sindhi, 2013; McLeskey & Waldron, 2010). There was a belief that both teachers and principals saw collaboration in a positive manner, and as an important way in which to improve the Ontario education system (Ministry of Education, 2013). In fact that the Ontario Ministry of Education has clearly stated that it is an expectation that all education stakeholders are required to demonstrate collaborative professionalism (Ministry of Education, 2016).

### **Problem of Practice**

Improving the working conditions of the ETFO members that I represent, as a member of the local executive, is a priority for me. My focus on the importance of teacher working conditions began nearly a decade ago when I attended a symposium on this topic, featuring the work of Ken Leithwood and Alma Harris as keynote speakers. The most significant piece of information that I took away from that day was that “teacher working conditions are student learning conditions” and that has always remained forefront in my mind (Leithwood & McAdie, 2007). Students also benefit when teachers perceive they have good working conditions; therefore, in a time in which there is increased accountability for student success (Directions, 2014a), a focus on improving teacher working conditions is valid. My interest in this area of research continued with my work as a released officer in my ETFO Local.

In a previous school year, I visited approximately 75 elementary school sites throughout my school board. Each worksite had a different culture and it was often evident from the moment I entered the building. Some things that have always stood out for me when I first enter a school are, the way in which I am greeted when I arrive, what types of things are hanging in the front foyer (e.g. student work or pre-printed educational posters), and how the school looks. I was often in the staff room of these elementary schools and could tell instantly how well used the room was. Some staff rooms seem sterile while others are quite obviously well used by the staff. How can one school be so different from another, even those that are alike in many ways (e.g. demographics, location)?

Part of my role as a released officer for ETFO often involved conversations with principals and working collaboratively with them to solve problems. I was in a particularly rare position of being a teacher with access to a number of worksites and administrators. When I

visited schools I could often see how the influence of the principals played a role in the culture of the school. Some school staffs appeared to work as a team and had developed a collaborative working environment, while other school staffs did not. As a released officer this was an area in which I could be of help to my colleagues and school administrators, working with them in various ways to improve collaboration in their schools. Some of the barriers that I noted when working with teachers and principals included miscommunication or simply a lack of communication, little time to work collaboratively, challenging relationships and differing beliefs. I was not always successful in improving the collaboration among my colleagues and was constantly searching for new ways to be of assistance.

The Ontario Leadership Framework states that one of the leadership roles of Ontario school principals is to work to promote collaborative learning cultures in their individual schools and beyond. The expectation is that these collaborative learning environments will improve teaching quality and student achievement and well-being (Ministry of Education, 2013). Given that this is the expectation set out by the Ontario Ministry of Education, what strategies do the principals who are successful at developing a collaborative working environment use and what supports do they make use of? What challenges do the principals who have been unable to develop that collaborative working environment face? What can the principals who have not been able to develop a collaborative working environment at their school site, learn from the principals who have found success in this area?

## **Research Questions**

The research questions for this study focused on exploring how principals' view collaborative work environments in their schools. They also explored ways in which principals can encourage and facilitate this work environment and the challenges the principals may face.

The main research question is: How do elementary principals develop collaborative work environments?

Exploring this question more deeply, I focused on the following sub-questions.

### **Sub-questions**

- How do principals understand collaborative work?
- What strategies do principals use to encourage collaborative work environments?
- What facilitates and supports principals to develop collaborative work environments?
- What challenges do principals experience when trying to create collaborative work environments?

These questions allowed the research participants to be more explicit when sharing their knowledge and experience regarding the ways in which they work to develop collaborative work environments in their schools.

## **Significance**

Collaborative work environments is a topic with many facets. There is a body of literature regarding the positive effects of a collaborative school environment on student achievement (Gruenert, 2005; Goddard, Goddard & Tschannen-Moran, 2007; Mangin, 2007; Heck & Hallinger, 2010; McLeskey & Waldron, 2010). There is a good deal less research

surrounding how administrators perceive the work of teachers and the ways in which both principals and teachers can work together to create collaborative working environments.

This study attempted to learn about the ways in which principals can develop collaborative working environments in their schools, and examine the supports required and challenges faced when developing such a work environment. It attempted to examine principals' views about and perceptions of collaborative work environments.

When principals and teachers believe they are working in a collaborative work environment and they understand that leadership is shared, it can result in a reduced workload for everyone (Leithwood & Azah, 2014). When teachers and principals are able to work in a collaborative manner, the tasks and events that are required for a school to run effectively can be distributed more evenly. For example, grade-alike teachers can share in the writing of report card comments or a group of teachers and/or administrators can take on the planning of a parent information session, rather than one individual being burdened with the task.

Another example of collaborative work environments possibly lessening the workload of principals is in the area of teacher turnover. The presence and perception of a school being a collaborative working environment lowers the rate of teacher turnover in that worksite (Allensworth, 2012; Muijs & Harris, 2006). Lower teacher turnover reduces principal workload, as principals do not have to hire as frequently and do not have to work to integrate the new teachers into the school culture (Allensworth, 2012).

Teachers report working 25 hours a week beyond the time spent in the classroom teaching (Directions, 2014a). This time is spent on a variety of tasks, related to their work in the classroom, such as planning, assessment, parent communication, and extra-curriculars. Although recent reforms in Ontario, such as smaller class sizes and professional development days

designated for assessment have been introduced in an attempt to lighten teacher workload in response to the increased accountability expected from the Ontario Ministry of Education, teachers still reported reforms had led to an increased workload (Directions, 2014a). The stated expectation from the Ontario Ministry of Education is that collaborative professionalism in schools is not intended to increase the workload of educators (Ministry of Education, 2016).

A recent study also looked at workload issues for Ontario principals. There were a number of common workload challenges mentioned by principals. These included school improvement planning, dealing with email, building staff capacity and working within the new Ontario Regulation 274/12 (Hiring Practices, 2014). Relationship building, sharing leadership and support from central office staff were all mitigating factors for the workload of Ontario principals (Leithwood & Azah, 2014). The information learned from this study, will hopefully help to reduce educator workload in Ontario.

This study will add to the small body of research regarding how collaborative work environments can impact the educators in schools and more specifically the elementary school principal, rather than focusing on how it impacts students. Most research to date has focused on the way in which collaborative environments affect student achievement in schools (Gruenert, 2005; Kruse & Louis, 2009; Goddard, Goddard & Tschannen-Moran, 2007; Mangin, 2007; Heck & Hallinger, 2010; McLeskey & Waldron, 2010). This study hopes to instead attempt to understand how elementary principals create collaborative work environments in their schools.



## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This literature review examines the concept of collaborative work environments in schools and how it is understood by elementary principals. Strategies principals use are examined as well as the supports they receive from both inside and outside the school. Finally challenges to the development of this collaborative work environment are also outlined.

### **Principals' Understanding of Collaborative Working Environments**

The role of the elementary principal is complex. While principals are expected and have the right to exercise formal leadership in schools, they are increasingly asked to share the responsibility of leadership with others (Deal & Peterson, 1990). Although principals are often expected to share leadership, it is ultimately the responsibility of the principal to set the tone in their schools and to demonstrate clarity of focus (Leithwood & Fullan, 2012). Principals need to be constantly working towards the improvement of the school climate, culture and working and learning conditions (Osman, 2012).

The terms, school climate and school culture, are sometimes used interchangeably. Culture can be defined as the set of shared meanings, beliefs and assumptions of the members of an organization. It is what individual members of such organizations believe or assume themselves (Van Houtte, 2005; Hoy & Hoy, 2003). It may be defined further as the guiding beliefs and expectations that are evident in the way a school operates (Fullan, 2007). Climate is defined as the perception of those meanings and beliefs (Hoy & Hoy, 2003). Climate is a broader term that encompasses culture, dealing with the school in its entirety (Van Houtte, 2005). When teachers and school administrators are working collaboratively, they are demonstrating their shared beliefs and assumptions about the way in which they want their work

environment to operate, in a concrete manner. A collaborative work environment is an expression of the school culture.

The literature on collaborative work environments in schools outlines what some elementary principals know about creating such an environment. These successful school leaders appreciate that an important part of their role as principal is to develop collaboration amongst their staff. These principals recognize that it is important to support and participate in a collaborative culture in their work environment (Sindhi, 2013; Mitchell & Castle, 2005). Principals who maintain a focus on developing a collaborative work environment in their schools, also recognize that the active support of the principal needs be obvious to the staff as they work to develop goals that are explicit and clear. Communication of this support by the principal and articulating that they value the team effort is important (Little, 1990).

Collaborative working environments take time to develop. They do not come about quickly. In schools that demonstrate collaborative working environments, there is a high level of collegiality, team work and dialogue about problems of practice. Schools with collaborative work environments support a shared sense of purpose, focus on long-term improvement and become networks of supportive professionals (Peterson, 1994).

Effective collaboration is not always easy. It often involves some difficulty or discomfort as ideas and strategies are challenged. Teachers who collaborate examine ideas and their existing instructional practices with a critical eye. They work to seek better alternatives, to the way in which they currently operate (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991).

## **The Ontario Context**

Many principals and teachers view collaborative environments in schools to be an essential component in improving the Ontario education system (Ministry of Education, 2013). The establishment of collaborative environments is a shift away from the traditional notion of isolation and autonomy that have been commonly found in Ontario schools. Ontario principals recognize that it is important to engage staff in direction setting, and planning, as well as distributing the leadership amongst school staff (Ministry of Education, 2013).

The recently released Policy/Program Memorandum No. 159 (Collaborative Professionalism) explains the expectations in Ontario school regarding collaborative professionalism, which it defines as “professionals at all level of the education system working together, sharing knowledge, skills and experience to improve student achievement and well-being of both students and staff” (Ministry of Education, 2016, p.1). This document explains that collaborative professionalism has the potential to improve both learning and working conditions in Ontario schools. In order for a culture of collaborative professionalism to be developed, a trusting environment where schools, school boards, the Ministry of Education and union leaders work together to create the necessary conditions is required (Ministry of Education, 2016).

Given the size of the education system in Ontario, there are many principals who could be expected to work towards the development of collaborative work environments in his or her school. A recent report noted that there were 2701 principals working in publicly funded schools in Ontario, with an average tenure as principal of 7.6 years (Pollock, Wang & Hauseman, 2014).

## **Creating a Safe Environment**

The principal fulfills many roles in a school, including but not limited to, that of site manager and instructional leader. It is the responsibility of the principal to create a safe school environment not only for the students, but also for the staff. Principals are charged with providing a school atmosphere that facilitates the emotional, physical and overall well-being of everyone. It is their job to develop a positive school culture (Sindhi, 2013) and to develop cultural norms (Kohm & Nance, 2009). The school principal is expected to develop a school culture which promotes shared knowledge and responsibility for outcomes (Institute for Education Leadership, 2013). All school staff and those in the wider school community also have a role to play in developing this environment, but it is the principal who takes a leadership role. The creation of a safe school environment, promotes and sustains student well-being and positive student behaviour (Ministry of Education, 2013). The development of a safe school environment is one of the preliminary steps towards the creation of a collaborative working environment in a school building.

## **Strategies to Encourage Collaborative Work Environments**

While principals understand the importance of developing a collaborative environment at their workplace, the way in which that occurs, differs by individual and location. Principals employ a number of diverse strategies to create collaborative work environments in their schools. As the environments in which principals work vary significantly, they are able to make use of a variety of different strategies. The strategies used by the principals may include: developing trust, relationship building, a particular style of leadership, shared decision making, capacity building, setting conditions, walkthroughs, information gathering and scheduling. Principals

may choose to use one strategy exclusively or to employ a variety of strategies. The strategy chosen may differ, depending on the circumstances and the people with whom the principal is working.

### **Gathering Information**

An important strategy that principals may use in order to develop collaborative working environments in their schools, is to gather input from all staff, when making major decisions that impact the school community (Crum, Sherman, & Myran, 2010). This can be done in a variety of both formal and informal ways. Teacher input could be solicited through surveys, email, and individual and group meetings as well as through information discussions between principal and teaching staff (Mullen & Jones, 2008). The most effective schools are now led by teams of leaders, rather than just one single leader, which therefore requires a great deal of input by all involved (Coleman, 2011). This change has occurred as the task of leading a school has become too complex and demanding for a single individual (Mulford, 2008). The gathering of information and opinions from all teaching staff prior to making decisions, can assist the principal in the development of a collaborative work environment.

### **Developing Trust**

The first strategy that principals may make use of when beginning to develop a collaborative work environment in their school is to develop trusting relationships with their staff. In order for principals and their teaching staff to begin to work collaboratively, there must be trust developed between them. Kruse and Louis (2009) explain that trust involves the demonstration of integrity, honesty and openness, concern and personal regard for others,

competence, reliability and consistency. Principals and teachers need to feel as though the other person (or people) are behaving in an honest manner (Crum, Sherman & Myran, 2010).

The establishment of trust between the principal and teachers is ideally one of the first actions that the principal undertakes when he or she arrives at a school, as many other aspects of the working relationships between the principal and teachers follow from this trusting relationship (Mullen & Jones, 2008). Positive working relationships, which may lead to collaborative work, cannot exist without trust (Crum, Sherman & Myran, 2010). Trust is required for the development of a collaborative working environment (Kruse & Louis, 2009). Principals can work to build trusting relationships with their teaching staff through the establishment of school norms that allow for constructive debate (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Trust and collaboration are mutually reinforcing, as when there is trust between the principal and the teachers, a collaborative environment is more likely to exist (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). While a trusting relationship does not guarantee collaboration, it increases the possibility that it can develop and be sustained. Principals cannot be held solely responsible for the development of this trusting relationship but they are able to set the tone and lay the foundation (Kruse & Louis, 2009). The development of such a trusting relationship with one's staff is arguably the most important strategy that a principal may undertake when attempting to develop a collaborative working environment.

### **Relationship Building**

Once trust has developed between the principal and the teaching staff, relationship building between the administrator and staff and amongst staff is the next important aspect to the development of a collaborative working environment (McLeskey & Waldron, 2010; Coleman,

2011; Crum, Sherman & Myran, 2010; Harris, Day, Hopkins, Hadfield, Hargreaves & Chapman, 2013). How well the adults in a school get along has greater influence on the character and quality of the school than anything else (Barth, 2006). The ability to successfully move a school towards a collaborative working environment is affected by the quality of relationships in the building. Without a positive working relationship amongst the principals and staff, the likelihood of a collaborative work environment developing is considerably lower (Ministry of Education, 2013a).

Barth (2006) describes four types of relationships amongst educators in schools: parallel play, adversarial, congenial and collegial. The most effective and most difficult to achieve is the collegial relationship. Indicators for this type of relationship include educators discussing professional practice, sharing of knowledge, observing each other while engaged in practice and rooting for one another's success. If the educators in a school are able to achieve relationships at the collegial level, then the likelihood of a collaborative working environment developing is magnified.

There are considerable differences among schools in regards to the relationships between staff and the way in which they interact (Moolenaar, 2012). The relationships at every worksite will differ and the way in which they are encouraged to develop will not be the same. The principal plays a key role in assisting in this relationship development. It is an expectation that an Ontario principal will have knowledge and understanding of relationships and of strategies used to promote team and individual development (Institute for Education Leadership, 2013). He or she must lead by example and display a leadership role to the teaching staff in the formation of these positive relationships. The principal demonstrates leadership by motivating

and energizing teachers and by building relationships with the disconnected teachers. This will increase the chance of the collaborative work environment flourishing (Fullan, 2002).

## **Leadership Style**

While one's leadership style as a principal can influence the running of a school in a number of ways, an appropriate leadership style can enhance the likelihood of a collaborative working environment being developed in a building. Eyal and Roth (2011) found that leadership style plays a significant role in teacher motivation and well-being. A school that demonstrates a collaborative working environment can be said to be operating under a collaborative leadership style. This is more commonly referred to as a distributed leadership (Coleman, 2011).

**Distributed leadership.** There are a variety of opinions regarding the definition of distributed leadership. For the purposes of this study, I understand distributed leadership as a type of collective leadership, where teachers are able to develop expertise by working collaboratively. Distributed leadership is a way of thinking about leadership rather than a technique or a practice. When a principal operates within the framework of distributed leadership, it is still their role to be ultimately responsible for the running of the organization, but it allows the skills and abilities of many to be utilized (Harris, 2004). Distributed leadership is about interactions among leaders and leadership practice, not simply roles and formal positions (Spillane, 2012). There is a recognition that expertise rather than position can be the basis of leadership within groups. Distributed leadership does not mean that the principal delegates tasks to teachers, but rather they let go of the tasks and allow others to make decisions in their own way (Mulford, 2008).



McLeskey and Waldron (2010) examined the role of the principal in distributing leadership amongst staff and its connection to collaborative school culture, through research on Comprehensive School Reform in the U.S. They explain that schools with a collaborative culture require a different type of leadership and decision making style compared to schools possessing a more traditional culture. They found that operating within a distributed style of leadership is the most significant way a principal can develop and support a collaborative culture in a school. Principals can promote collaboration in simple ways, such as having teachers help to set the agenda for a staff meetings and through helping to facilitate teachers working together and teaching cooperatively (Scott & Smith, 1987).

Principals can support the development of distributed leadership in their schools by being explicit in their willingness to share leadership and empowering others to share decision making (McLeskey & Waldron, 2010). Principals having a sense of the needs, motivations and individual professional goals of each staff member would facilitate this shared decision making (Crum, Sherman & Myran, 2010). A principal operating within the framework of a distributed leadership style is more likely to be successful in creating a collaborative work environment in their school.

### **Shared Decision Making**

Shared decision making can be defined as teachers being given the responsibility to make decisions on behalf of the school (Muijs & Harris, 2006). Shared decision making amongst principals and teaching staff can lead to the creation of a more collaborative working environment. When decisions are made in a shared way, teachers are more likely to believe in and support those decisions (Sanzo, Sherman & Clayton, 2011). It is much more likely for

changes in schools to be successful, when the decision making process is an interactive one (Osman, 2012).

When an elementary school principal is operating from a distributed leadership perspective, they are able to allow other members of their staff greater decision making power (McLeskey & Waldron, 2010). While there are many aspects involved in leading in a distributed manner, one of the important components is allowing the decision making to be shared amongst all staff. The principal is not required to make all of the decisions that are necessary for the day to day running of the school. The principal is comfortable enough with his or her staff to allow others to assist in the decision making process.

Consulting with teachers regarding the focus of collaboration in the school has a positive impact on the perception of teachers regarding their work and their collaboration with others (Directions, 2014). Having a staff who are willing to work collaboratively, in their interactions with students and when participating in professional learning, creates a more positive working environment for the principal as well (Leithwood & Azah, 2014).

### **Capacity Building**

Distributed leadership is key in schools with collaborative cultures, as leadership is often shared amongst the principal and other school personnel (McLeskey & Waldron, 2010). This increased need for leadership in schools with collaborative cultures, is a key reason why principals today must work to develop capacity amongst their staff. The principal cannot fulfill all of the leadership roles on their own (Sindhi, 2013).

Mitchell and Sackney (2001) explain that there are a variety of ways to build capacity in an educational setting. Building capacity allows for the development of leadership skills among

multiple members of the teaching staff, both in a formal and informal manner. They suggest building one's own personal capacity involves exploring one's professional networks to identify new and different ideas. Building interpersonal capacity involves building a well-functioning team of people who work and learn together. Finally they explain that organization capacity requires changes in current school structure to allow new organizational structures that ask teachers to work in a more collaborative manner and engage in more professional conversations and inquiry. Harris (2004) describes capacity building as a form of collective leadership in which teachers develop expertise by working together.

Capacity building is also a form of leadership development (Mayrowetz, 2008). When principals distribute leadership in their buildings, they are helping to build leadership capacity amongst their teaching staff. Principals will foster this collaborative environment by sharing responsibility with teachers as often as possible and they must work to help with skill development for their teaching staff (Kohm & Nance, 2009; Institute for Education Leadership, 2012). One way that principals can work to build teacher leadership capacity is through ongoing and targeted professional learning for their teaching staff (Mullen & Jones, 2008).

Although building capacity can be seen as a singular strategy towards the development of a collaborative working environment, principals are able to build capacity amongst their staff in a variety of ways. They are able to do so by creating leadership opportunities through the creation of committees for their teachers to develop leadership skills. These committees could develop curriculum or lead professional development for others. Principals can model being good communicators and be readily accessible to their staff. They help to develop teacher leaders by treating the teachers on their staff as professionals and by relying on the expertise of those teacher leaders (Mullen & Jones, 2008).

**Expanded leadership opportunities.** Principals know their staff best and one strategy to assist in the development of collaborative work environments in their schools is to act as conduits for leadership development of their teaching staff. They are able to be the link between the teachers in their building and professional development opportunities available to them. Effective principals allow teachers, who wish to take advantage of professional development and training that is relevant to them and their future goals, to do so (Mullen & Jones, 2008).

Principals are an important component in the process of allowing expanded leadership roles in their schools for teachers with whom they work as they are most able to determine the opportunities for which they are best suited. These roles and opportunities will only be met with success when the identified teachers want to undertake them (Peterson, 1994). One does not need to demonstrate the capacity for formal leadership in order to contribute positively to a collaborative work environment. People can demonstrate leadership qualities in a number of ways that do not necessarily involve those formal roles. These could include such things as being willing to share new learning with a colleague or simply being open to learning new ideas and trying new methodologies for the classroom.

Developing this teacher leadership role does not mean that teachers take on formal leadership positions in their schools, nor does it mean that they are required to take on these roles, but rather that they engage in collaboration and facilitation with their colleagues. These types of leadership are necessary to the success of any organization, not simply educational organizations (Peterson, 1994). Principals and teachers may view leadership opportunities differently. The differences may be explained as teacher leadership versus formal leadership.

Mullen and Jones (1998) explain that in their study, principals saw things such as running school committees and sharing learning with fellow staff members on a PA day as leadership

roles in the school. These aspects of leadership could be described as teacher leadership roles. In contrast, teachers felt that only paid leadership roles, commonly viewed as more formal leadership roles, such as working as an acting vice-principal or department head, were valid leadership opportunities. Principals can work to assist teachers in seeing the value of all chances to demonstrate leadership.

### **Setting Conditions**

Setting the conditions for collaborative work in schools is the responsibility of the principal. This is supported by the Ontario Leadership Framework, which anticipates that principals will set the conditions and demonstrate their vision for the school, through the work that they do every day (Institute for Education Leadership, 2013). Some ways in which principals set the conditions that create collaborative working environments include: gathering relevant data and making it accessible; organizing meetings so that every voice is heard; ensuring meetings result in clear goals and action plans; creating SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely) goals; and measuring progress on these goals throughout the year (Kohm and Nance, 2009). Working towards common goals is an important aspect of working in a collaborative manner (Pater, Pettit & Wilson, 2012). This setting of conditions for the school in general and the school staff more specifically, assists in the creation of a collaborative working environment and can be considered a strategy in working towards the realization of such an environment (Sanzo, Sherman & Clayton, 2011).

**Strategies for goal setting:** While it is appropriate that principals may take the lead in the goal setting process in their school (Rhodes, Stevens, Hemmings, 2011), teacher input is

essential when setting goals and developing a vision for the school (Mullen & Jones, 1998). Principals need not work in isolation.

When principals involve teachers in the goal setting process in their schools, they are demonstrating their ability to work collaboratively. The principal is setting the tone in their building regarding the expectations on staff collaboration. The administrator is modelling the development of a collaborative work environment through the practise of goal setting (McLeskey & Waldron, 2010).

It is most effective when principals clearly define their vision and goals, in regards to establishing the collaborative work environment in their school (Rhodes, Stevens, Hemmings, 2011). Principals who develop collaborative cultures in their schools shift from being the person who sets the goals, to being the one who sets up the conditions that allow others to establish goals (Kohm and Nance, 2009). The most successful school leaders, are able to create a shared purpose in their schools (Leithwood, Harris & Strauss, 2010). When teachers and principals have a shared purpose, it is easier for a collaborative work environment to develop.

## **Walkthroughs**

Ginsberg and Murphy (2002) explain that one strategy that principals could use to assist in developing a collaborative working environment in their schools is to do walkthroughs in their schools. In their study they found that frequent, brief, unscheduled walkthroughs improved the collaborative environments in the schools in which these walkthroughs occurred. In order to be effective, these classroom visits will ideally be no longer than 5 minutes, and they can be used to help the administrator gauge the school climate.

Walkthroughs are a mandated aspect of the School Effectiveness Framework that is used as a guide in all publicly funded Ontario schools. These formal walkthroughs are conducted by teams from the district school board and are used as a means to gauge compliance with the stated school and district goals. More informal walkthroughs are also conducted on a regular basis by the school principal. Principals are to use these walkthroughs as a way to learn what is being taught in each of the classrooms in their schools and to allow them to more effectively offer targeted professional development to the teachers on their staff (Ministry of Education, 2013b). While these walkthroughs are mandatory, they are not to be evaluative, from the perspective of a formal teacher evaluation (personal communication, 2014).

While the walkthroughs are not to be evaluative, in terms of individual teachers, when a work environment is not a collaborative one, they could be seen in such a way. This is one area where the trust that is developed between the school principal and his or her staff is key. For the walkthrough to be of use, the principal will generally provide feedback to teachers after their classroom visit. Simple, focused feedback that allows teachers to reflect is most helpful. When working relationships are positive, the feedback given by the principal can be seen as supportive, rather than evaluative. Informational and supportive feedback is more productive than evaluative feedback in creating change (Ginsberg & Murphy, 2002). When the feedback given to teachers emphasizes student performance, there is a demonstrated positive impact on the perception of the teacher that they are working in a collaborative working environment (Directions, 2014a).

## Scheduling

The timetabling of a school is the responsibility of principals, although it is limited by the resources available to them. The thoughtful allocation of these staffing resources, can be seen as a strategy in the development of a collaborative working environment.

**Common preparation time.** The scheduling of classes and the preparation time of the teachers, can allow for a greater collaborative work environment. Time during the work day allows teachers a greater capacity to work collaboratively. This could be in the form of common preparation time or in regularly scheduled subject based team meetings (Lieberman, 1986; Little, 1990; Honawar, 2008). If in the form of a team meeting, this should be in addition to the teacher's preparation time. Khorsheed (2007) refers to this time not as preparation time, but as collaborative professional learning. This ideally occurs during the school day, when students are in the building, as this allows for practice based learning, such as modelling and co-teaching.

Teachers who work in schools with common planning time, feel a greater sense of community with their colleagues (Habegger, 2008). The scheduling of common preparation time, or even an offer by principals to cover classes for teachers, results in collaborative work in schools being more likely to occur (Hargreaves, 1991).

**In-school solutions.** Beyond common preparation time, there are other ways for principals to schedule opportunities for teachers to engage in professional dialogue and to work collaboratively. A principal could provide substitute teachers or cover classes themselves for teachers on their staff who wish to engage in collaborative activities. The successful development of collaborative relationships requires time and structured opportunities to work together and principals are in a position to assist teachers in finding the time to work collaboratively (Peterson, 1994).



Giving the teachers the time to work together in small teams, however often as is possible, is another example of ways in which principals can provide teachers opportunities to collaborate. Some schools have also created “schools within schools” models, where smaller groups of teachers work together on a regular basis, in order to allow for greater teacher collaboration (Leithwood & McAdie, 2007; Honawar, 2008). Creative scheduling, such as re-organizing classes for subjects such as physical education or music, may be solutions as well, depending on the collective agreement (Khorsheed, 2007). Release time during the day, for grade-alike teams to work together is also a useful way to develop collaboration among teachers, as well as the use of professional activity days for collaborative work (Sever & Bowgren, 2007).

**Large-scale solutions.** Some strategies that could improve the collaborative work environment in schools are beyond the scope of the individual school principal. Solutions on a larger scale could also be implemented board or province wide, such as the creation of more professional development days or increased class size, which might free up funds for release time. The lengthening of school days or reducing the number of hours students are required to be in school while teachers’ hours remain the same are also possible solutions. This would give teachers more time during the instructional day to work together collaboratively. Sever and Bowgren (2007) suggest early dismissal days for students, allowing teachers a block of time to work collaboratively, without lengthening the school day. Another possibility is a four and a half day schedule for students, giving teachers the opportunity to meet for one half day a week (Raywid, 1993).

### **Supports Received**

The development of a collaborative working environment in schools requires structures to be set in place and a variety of supports to be available. These supports can either be structural in nature or they can deal with individuals. These supports may come from within the school and board or from an outside source.

### **Policy**

The Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) was developed to support and sustain high quality leadership in Ontario schools. School administrators in Ontario are familiar with the framework and may consider its use when working to develop a collaborative work environment. The OLF provides a framework for growth as well as details and describes good leadership. It is applicable in the various contexts of leadership in Ontario schools (Institute for Education Leadership, 2012). The OLF promotes and supports the development of collaborative working environment in schools and acknowledges that there are a number of ways that leaders can develop such environments.

The Ontario Ministry of Education has re-iterated its commitment to collaboration in Ontario school through the recent release of Policy/Program Memorandum No. 159, Collaborative Professionalism. This document sets out an expectation that education stakeholders are to be working towards the building of collaborative cultures in Ontario schools (Ministry of Education, 2016).

## **Staffing Levels**

As previously mentioned, the principal is responsible for timetabling the school. They are charged with making use of the staffing allocation provided to them, by their school board. Hargreaves (1991) explains that when teachers are able to have common preparation time, it is more likely to result in collaborative work. In order for this to be able to occur, a school must receive adequate staffing from the school board, to allow for the possibility of teachers being able to have common preparation time. When principals are supported by the board, with the provision of adequate levels of staffing, the ability for them to develop a collaborative work environment, increases.

## **Stability**

Principal mobility is a deterrent to the development of collaborative working environments. There is a great deal of movement among elementary principals in Ontario schools. A recent study found that 49% of elementary school principals had been in their current school for two years or less (People for Education, 2011). While this does encompass new principals as well as principals who have recently changed schools, it indicates a great deal of turnover.

Collaborative work environments are founded on relationships. Relationships take time to develop. It is difficult for principals to develop strong connections with their communities and relationships with their teaching staff when they have been in their schools for such a short time (People for Education, 2011). Principal stability and time are needed for positive working relationships and conditions to be created (Fuller, 2007). McAdams (1997) explains that for a

cohesive working team to develop, a level of trust and mutual respect needs to be present, one that can only come into being in a longer term professional relationship.

A shift in school leadership can unravel the collaborative work environment that has developed (Little, 1990). Fuller (2007) explains that high rates of principal turnover can lead to greater teacher turnover. This increases the lack of stability in a school and can slow down the process of the development of a collaborative work environment.

The school board can support the existence of collaborative work environments, by leaving the principals in a particular school for an extended amount of time (Institution for Education Leadership, 2013). The literature is not in agreement regarding the ideal length of time for a principal to remain in one school. Hargreaves (2005) suggests principals should remain in the same school, for a minimum of five years. McAdams (1997) argues that a four to five year tenure in a school is not long enough to allow for systemic change at the local level. A study examining the issue of principal turnover by Mascall and Leithwood (2010) suggests that principals are most effective when they remain in a school for a minimum of four years, and ideally five to seven years. A study by Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) suggests that principals must remain in a school for a minimum of three years, in order for any significant improvement to occur, although they state this is a minimum and individual circumstances should be considered. Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) recommend that school boards should examine each principal transfer on its own merits, rather than instituting a policy of required movement.

A collaborative environment is most likely to be developed, when principals feel as though they will have sufficient time in one location, to build a sense of shared purpose with the staff. If the principal is in danger of being transferred due to changes being slow to occur in the school, then the development of a collaborative working environment is less likely to occur

(Leithwood, Harris & Strauss, 2010). Teachers in schools with a rapid principal turnover rate demonstrate a lack of shared purpose and a cynicism about the commitment of the principal (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). More experienced principals may moderate the negative effect of principal turnover, as they are often more skilled in supporting a collaborative environment among their teaching staff (Béteille, Kalogrides & Loeb, 2012).

### **Support from Union**

Another way in which principals can make use of outside support in developing a collaborative working environment, is to develop a positive relationship with their local union. The Ontario Leadership Framework encourages such a relationship. It suggests that local union leaders be involved in planning at the system and board level (Institute for Education Leadership, 2012). The Ontario Ministry of Education acknowledges that union leaders are partners in the creation of the necessary conditions to develop collaborative and trusting environments in schools (Ministry of Education, 2016). Meredith (2009) found a positive correlation between the union administrator relationship and school culture. This was found to be the case even in times of difficult labour-management relations, such as leading up to a strike.

Teacher unions are supportive of their members working in a collaborative manner. They demonstrate their support through their involvement in projects such as the Teachers Learning Together (TLT) project, where teachers were able to undertake collaborative action research in the area of Mathematics (Bruce, Jarvis, Flynn, & Brock, 2011), and the Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP), which is supported by the Ontario Teachers Federation (Ontario Teachers Federation, 2016). One concern that is raised and can be addressed by the district

school board is that none of the assessments undertaken during the time teachers are given to work together, are used in a punitive way (Honawar, 2008).

### **Challenges to the Creation of a Collaborative Work Environment**

The creation of a collaborative work environment can be a challenge. Schools are vastly different places and there is no one size fits all answer. What works in one school building, may not work in another. What worked last year for a particular principal, may not work this year, due to any number of changes that may have occurred.

### **Culture**

School cultures are often deeply embedded, and therefore one of the challenges that the principal could face in the development of a collaborative working environment is that this new approach could come into conflict with the established school culture. The culture of a school involves the shared meanings, beliefs and assumptions of the people who work there (Van Houtte, 2005). Principals inherit the culture of a worksite. While one individual can work to modify that culture, by helping to shape those beliefs and assumptions, it is not possible for those changes to occur simply due to the actions of one individual. In order to change the culture of a school, a principal must first understand the current, existing culture (Kruse & Louis, 2009) and work to lead the changes. One cannot expect to quickly alter the culture of a school. Facilitating a cultural transformation is an important aspect of creating deep, lasting change in schools (Fullan, 2002).

Turning around a school culture is an adaptive challenge, rather than a technical one. When the challenge is technical, while it may be complex, it can be resolved through an organizations' current structures and procedures. Adaptive challenges can only be addressed through changes in people's beliefs and priorities (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

There are schools where the established school culture is decidedly non-collaborative. Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) describe three types of non-collaborative cultures: balkanization, comfortable collaboration and contrived collegiality.

**Balkanization.** This type of school culture is often found in larger schools. Teachers in these schools identify more closely with a small group of colleagues, rather than the whole teaching staff or themselves as individuals. These groups often work in isolation and can be described as cliques, as each group seeks power and influence for themselves. This type of school culture discourages the sharing of ideas and solutions amongst the entire teaching staff.

**Comfortable collaboration.** When a school is operating in a mode of comfortable collaboration, teachers get along on the surface. They offer advice, they exchange materials or instructional techniques, but they do not engage in the deeper discussions of teaching, curriculum or long range planning. When colleagues are together to problem solve, there is a focus on smaller, short term issues. Discussion involving larger, more challenging issues facing the teaching staff are avoided.

**Contrived collegiality.** School cultures that can be described as ones of contrived collegiality, are work environments where formal structures exist to compel teachers to collaborate. These could include such procedures as school improvement teams, peer coaching and joint teacher planning. While these formalized structures bring teachers together and may increase the sharing among the staff, they do not guarantee the development of the deeper links

that are characteristic of collaborative working environments. While a school culture with formalized structures of collaboration is not inherently a negative, there is a possibility that teachers forced to engage in this type of collaboration may become less likely to want to be engaged in true collaboration.

### **Isolation**

Another challenge to the development of a collaborative working environment is the traditional way in which teachers have worked in the past. Historically, teachers worked in isolation in their classrooms (Turning Points, 2001). In Ontario, there has been a shift away from this autonomous model to a more collaborative one (Leithwood & Fullan, 2012), but professional isolation remains a barrier to developing collaborative work environments in schools (Mulford, 2010).

### **Coercion**

In order to establish a collaborative working environment all of the staff must buy in and be willing to work together. If participation in creating this environment is coerced, then there will be conflict and the learning community will be less effective (Dickerson, 2011). Kohm and Nance (2009) found that when schools are under pressure to improve their achievement results, they tend to abandon collaboration.

### **Principal Turnover**

Principal movement is common in elementary schools. Principals may be moved for a variety of reasons, both positive and negative. No matter the reason, this frequent turnover does



not allow for the in depth relationships that were common between principals and teachers in the 1970s and 1980s. Principals are more likely to be seen as anonymous managers (Hargreaves, 2005). The development of a collaborative working environment is less likely to occur if the probability that the principal will soon be transferred, is high (Leithwood, Harris & Strauss, 2010).

## **Time**

Collaborative working environments take time to develop. The creation of such an environment in one's school is time consuming. Attempting to develop a collaborative working environment is not an appropriate strategy for a principal who is seeking to implement change quickly (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991).

**Time as a staff.** Time to work together is an essential component of developing collaborative working environments in schools. Finding time for teachers to meet and develop their collaborative networks is a challenge for elementary schools. Schools are tightly staffed and there is often little formal, regularly scheduled time available for teachers to meet (Raywid, 1993). The collective agreement with the teacher union may limit the ways in which the personnel resources are used (Khorsheed, 2007), such as a principal being unable to combine classes for regularly scheduled preparation time. Time for teachers to work collaboratively must be built into the school's schedule and the yearly school calendar (Kruse, Louis & Bryk, 1994; Honawar, 2008). This can be achieved in a minor way through the use of professional activity days and release time being provided to smaller groups of teachers (Sever & Bowgren, 2007).

## **School size**

The size of a school both from a physical and a human resource standpoint can be a challenge to the development of a collaborative working environment. In a large school, it would be nearly impossible to interact with everyone on a regular basis. When teacher's actual work spaces are not in close proximity, more effort is required on their part to develop collaborative working relationships (Kruse, Louis & Bryk, 1994). In a smaller school, there may not be a large enough complement of staff for teachers to have the time to work together in a collaborative way (Raywid, 1993). The development of teacher teams in larger schools, such as grade or division-alike teams, can mitigate some of these challenges (Khorsheed, 2007; Leithwood & McAdie, 2007). These teacher teams could meet more regularly to work collaboratively, as compared to the staff as a whole.

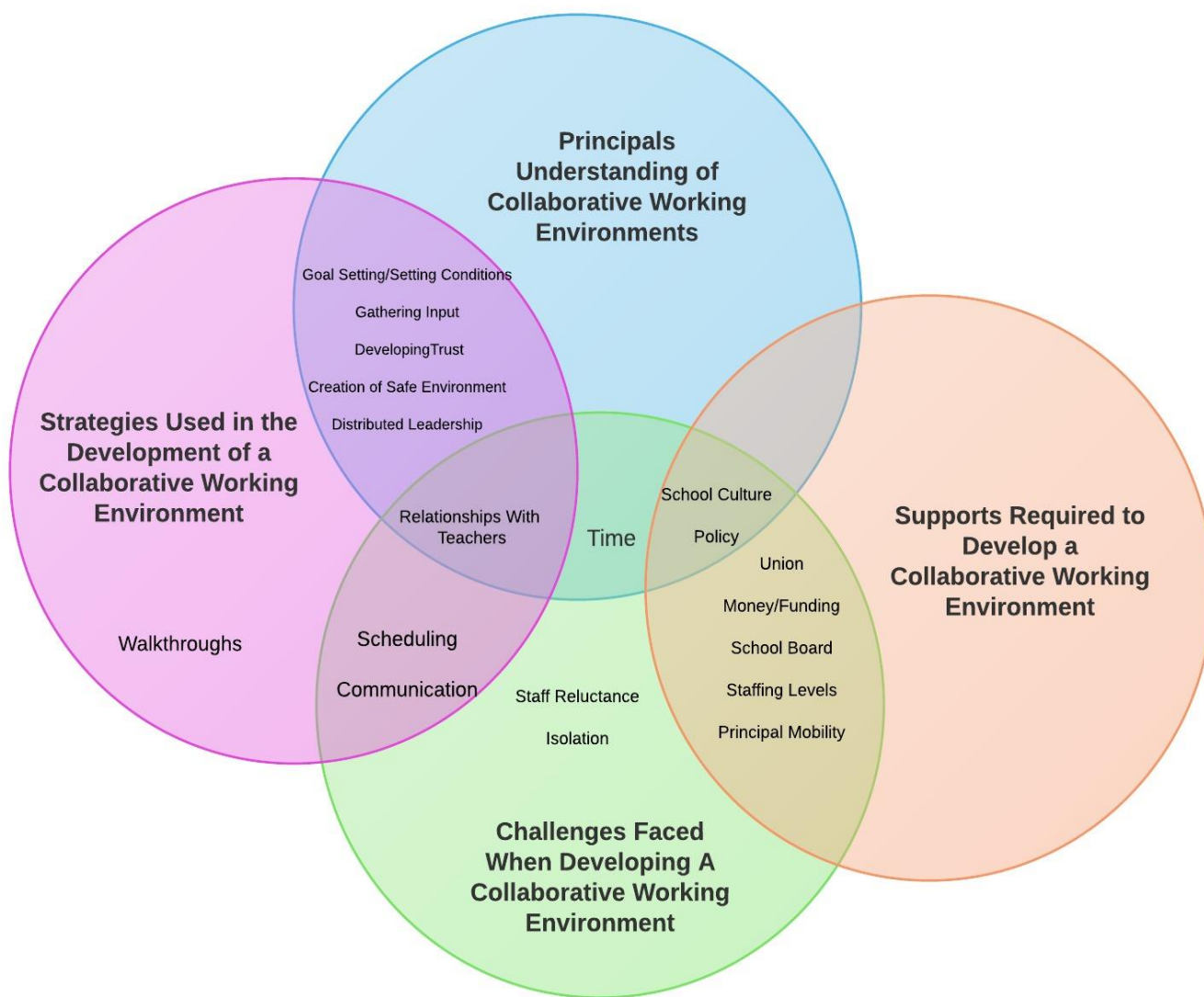
## **Connection to Conceptual Framework**

The following conceptual framework has been built based on the themes outlined in the preceding literature. The themes presented have been organized based on the research sub-questions. Those questions examined principals' understanding of collaborative work environments, the strategies they use in developing them, the supports principals receive when creating collaborative environments and the challenges they face in doing so. Many themes or ideas were found to be overlapping between the sub-questions. Prominent topics included the notions of trust, relationships, funding, time, communication and leadership style.

## **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this thesis consists of four general concepts: principals' understanding of collaborative work environments, strategies for creating a collaborative work environment, supports required for and what facilitates a collaborative work environment, and the challenges principals encounter in the development and maintenance of the collaborative work environment in schools. A conceptual framework guides the choices made throughout the research process. It assists in the development of research questions, choice of research design, sample and sampling selection, data collection strategies as well as data analysis and interpretation (Merriam, 2009). The conceptual framework for this research study is employed to examine how principals develop a collaborative work environment. It explores how principals understand what a collaborative work environment is and how it can be established and/or sustained in their schools. Principals can encourage, or alternatively discourage, the development of this collaborative work environment in a number of ways and through the use of a variety of strategies. Principals do not work in isolation and therefore their relationships with not only their staff, but also their superiors and the union can play a role in the establishment and maintenance of a collaborative work environment. The leadership style of the principal can play a part in the development of a collaborative work environment. No matter how the principal approaches the initiation of a collaborative work environment, there are often challenges faced by administrators in their attempt to establish a collaborative work environment in their school.

**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Development and Sustainment of a Collaborative Work Environment**



The above diagram depicts the interactions between the four concepts discussed in the conceptual framework. In reviewing the relevant literature, it was apparent that there is a great

deal of overlap amongst the four different concepts. A Venn diagram was chosen as the manner in which to display this information visually, due to the overlap of topics contained within the four concepts.

Principals' understanding of collaborative work environments include the idea that while leadership in school may be shared, it is ultimately their responsibility to set the tone in the school (Leithwood & Fullan, 2012). Principals understand that it is important to distribute the leadership amongst school staff (Ministry of Education, 2013) and work together with the staff to set relevant goals (Mullen & Jones, 2008). In order for a collaborative work environment to be developed principals need to support and participate in the collaborative culture in their school, working together with their staff (Sindhi, 2013). They are encouraged to work to develop a positive school culture (Osman, 2012). It is essential that they take the time to develop relationships with their teaching staff, spending a substantial amount of time building trust (Mullen & Jones, 2008). A collaborative working relationship is much more likely to develop, if such trust exists (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Some of the strategies that principals use in the development of a collaborative work environment have been mentioned above, such as developing a positive relationship with one's staff, along with building trust, setting goals and distributing the leadership amongst the teaching staff. Other strategies found in the literature, that principals could employ include scheduling that allows teachers time to work together (Habegger, 2008; Khorsheed, 2007), walkthroughs that offer teachers the opportunity to receive reflective feedback (Ginsberg & Murphy, 2002) and communicating with and gathering input from all members of the school staff (Crum, Sherman & Myran, 2010).

The use of a distributed leadership style is another important strategy in not only the development and sustainment of collaborative work environments, but also in principals' understanding of such an environment. When a principal operates from a distributed leadership framework, they are able to make use of the skills and abilities of many (Harris, 2004) and allow others to make decisions independently (Mulford, 2008). These principals share in the decision making with their teaching staff. When decisions are made in a collaborative manner, teachers are more likely to support these decisions (Sanzo, Sherman & Clayton, 2011). Operating from a distributed leadership perspective also means building capacity in one's school by working to develop future leaders (Mayrowetz, 2008).

In order for a collaborative work environment to be developed, principals require support. This support can come from within the school and or board, or from outside. Internal supports include adequate funding from the board to allow for sufficient staffing (Hargreaves, 1991), allowing principals to remain in a school for a number of years, and therefore ensuring stability (Fuller, 2007; Institute for Education Leadership, 2013). The board can also work to effectively incorporate policies into their practice that encourage the development of collaborative work environments, such as the Ontario Leadership Framework (Institute for Education Leadership, 2013). The Ministry of Education could be seen as a support external from the board, although it is the district school board that enacts their policies and procedures. The teacher union can also be a support to principals when working to develop and sustain collaborative work environments in their schools, through the development of positive working relationships (Institute for Education Leadership, 2013).

Some of the entities that offer support to principals when they are working to develop collaborative work environments in their schools, can also present challenges to the process.

While having a positive school culture can assist in the development of a collaborative work environment, if one does not exist it is difficult for such an environment to be developed (Ministry of Education, 2013). Principal mobility, which when it is infrequent can be seen as supportive to the creation of collaborative environments, when it occurs frequently it can be seen as a deterrent (Leithwood, Harris & Strauss, 2010). Time is required to develop collaborative work environments. This cannot occur when principals are frequently transferred, nor can it occur when there is insufficient time during the school day or year, for the staff to work together. Finding time to work together is also a challenge in larger schools, with multiple teachers (Kruse, Louis & Bryk, 1994). The lack of time is also a function of budgetary constraints, which restrict the time available to work together. With larger school budgets, more release time could be available, allowing the teachers more time to work together during the school day (Directions, 2014a).

In examining the literature regarding how principals develop collaborative work environments, many themes were repeated. Building relationships with staff, developing trust, the use of a distributed leadership style, communicating with teachers and making use of supports available to them, were all seen in the literature in multiple ways. The created visual demonstrated this through the use of overlapping circles to represent the information.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This study, examining principals' understanding of collaborative work environments, was carried out using an interpretivist approach. Each elementary principal that participated in the study had their own view and belief regarding not only what a collaborative work environment was, but also the strategies that they undertake to develop such an environment, the supports that assist them in doing so and finally the challenges that they face when attempting to develop and sustain a collaborative work environment in their school.

The research was undertaken using a qualitative research design. The study was not begun with a formal hypothesis in mind, and I was open to themes emerging from the data as presented. Semi-structured interviews were the chosen research method, as the use of the semi-structured interview allowed me to probe the responses and dig more deeply into the research topic with the participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Harrell, 2009). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 elementary principals, at which point it was determined that data saturation had occurred. Similar themes emerged from the information shared by participants, with each participant having their own individual point of view or experience linked to the common themes. These themes will be shared and examined in the upcoming Findings and Discussion chapters.

#### **Interpretivist Approach**

Research conducted using an interpretivist approach reasons that reality is socially constructed. There is no single, observable reality. Every event has numerous realities or interpretations. Everyone experiences the world in a different way (Merriam, 2009). The principal concern of an interpretivist approach is in understanding the way in which an individual



creates, modifies and interprets the world in which they exist (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

This approach was used to frame this study, as the study explores the understandings of principals regarding how to define and develop a collaborative work environment in their school. This study is not attempting to understand one universal definition of a collaborative work environment in schools, but rather to understand the many ways in which it is defined by elementary school principals.

This study fits within the interpretivist paradigm as a collaborative work environment does not only look different in every school, but it is not interpreted or viewed in the same way by every collaborator in each location. While many would be in agreement regarding what one would look like in a broad sense, the smaller details and the way in which a collaborative work environment is viewed and developed may look different in every school and by every participant in every location. Each principal can understand and support collaborative work environments in different ways.

While principals may all be attempting to arrive at a commonly held description of a collaborative working environment for their school, the strategies undertaken by each one will differ. There are different paths to the same destination. Principals may be in agreement that there are people and structures who support their development of a collaborative work environment, but they may not agree regarding who those individuals or structures are. The same can be said of the challenges to the creation of such a work environment. All principals may agree that there are challenges they face when working to create a collaborative work environment in their school, but the challenges may be different. These could be dependent on the individual principal as well as the time and work location, among multiple factors. The

principal's own understanding of collaborative work environments may not remain static, as their understanding could shift over time or differ depending on their work location or a changing staff.

### **Qualitative Study**

The determination of a research method is linked to the approach from which the researcher is operating. The choice of methodology is governed by our own beliefs and worldview. It is also governed by the research question asked. Whether one chooses to conduct a quantitative or qualitative study, depends on the way in which one sees the world (Crotty, 2003), and what one wants to find out about it.

While exceptions do exist, qualitative methods of data collection are most often used to answer research questions that are posed from an interpretivist approach (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006), such as the research question examined in this study. Qualitative interviewing fits within the interpretivist approach as it allows participants to share their experiences and understandings (King & Horrocks, 2010).

A qualitative study involves the collection, analysis and interpretation of narrative data to learn about a certain topic or idea (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012). It is an attempt to uncover the meaning of that topic or idea. In qualitative research, researchers want to understand how people interpret their experiences and how they construct their worlds, along with the meaning they give to their experiences (Merriam, 2009).

Other study designs would not allow the researcher the latitude to explore the topic of collaborative work environments without having developed a hypothesis, prior to data collection (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012). The use of a qualitative study design gives the

researcher the ability to explore the topic in a more broad way, and develop theories and find meaning, once the data has been collected. Qualitative researchers need to keep an open mind and allow the study to progress in way that is somewhat organic (Corbin, 2001).

## **Method**

In this study, I attempted to determine how principals understand the topic of collaborative work environments, as well as the strategies used, what supports and facilitates the development of the collaborative work environment and the challenges principals face when creating such environments. There was a focus on the actual experiences of the participants, which lent itself to the semi-structured interview format (King & Horrocks, 2010). This type of interview format allowed for more flexibility in responses and a greater ability for the participants to be probed for further information.

## **Interviews**

Using an interview format allowed for the gathering of specific data from the participants, while still allowing me to respond to the participant and their worldview. It gives the researcher the flexibility to explore new ideas that develop on the topic, during the interview (Merriam, 2009). An in-depth interview allows the researcher to understand the lived experience of others and the meaning that they make of that experience (Seidman, 2013).

The interview format is an appropriate one to use in a qualitative study, as the importance of qualitative research is not in the collection of standardized, generalizable data. The use of an interview allows the researcher to probe more and dig deeper into responses. (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). From an interpretivist standpoint, the

interview allows the researcher to explore the interpretations of each participant. As the understanding of a collaborative work environment and how it is developed may differ for each principal interviewed, the interview format allows the researcher to better understand the point of view of each participant.

**Interview format.** The interview format used for this study was a semi-structured one. Semi-structured interviews are commonly used in studies operating from the interpretivist approach (King & Horrocks, 2010). Semi-structured interviews are a combination of both the structured and unstructured approaches (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012). In both structured and semi-structured interviews, the same questions are asked of the participants, which allows for comparability of responses (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). In semi-structured interviews though, such as was used in this study, the interviewer has more discretion. While the interview questions are standardized (see attached questions), the order in which they are asked can be more flexible and the researcher has the freedom to probe for more in-depth information from the participants (Harrell & Bradley, 2009).

The use of a less structured interview format, allows freedom of responses to the participants. It does not assume, as is the case in more structured interviews, that the researcher and interviewee view the world in the same way. The use of the semi-structured format allows the researcher to modify their questions or wording, as a response to the world view of the participant (Merriam, 2009).

As previously mentioned, the interviews conducted for this research study were approximately 45 minutes in length. Prior to being questioned regarding the topic of this research study, participants were asked initial questions regarding their background and experience as education professionals. All of the in-person interviews took place at the

participants' schools, with one interview conducted over the phone. The interviews were recorded using multiple audio recording devices and were then transcribed at a later date, by the researcher.

**Interview questions.** Once the research participants had shared information regarding their background and level of experience, the first question asked of them was regarding their understanding of a collaborative work environment and asking them to describe it. This was followed up by questioning whether the participant felt as though their school was a collaborative working environment. They were asked to expand on the reasons why they believed that it either was or was not.

After the more general questions regarding the existence of a collaborative work environment in their building, principals were then asked about ways in which they work as an individual to create a collaborative work environment in their school. As a follow-up, they were invited to disclose strategies that they would share with other administrators who were attempting to develop a collaborative work environment in their own schools. Probes for this question included ideas such as building trust, leadership style, shared decision making, capacity building and scheduling.

Following the questions regarding the ways in which one might create a collaborative working environment, study participants were asked to reveal any challenges that they have faced when attempting to develop or sustain such an environment. Probes for this question included asking principals about their school culture, teachers working in isolation, staff being reluctant participants and the usefulness of coercing staff to participate in collaborative activities. After describing the challenges they have faced, principals were asked what changes they would like to make in order to improve the collaborative work environment in their school. This was a

broad question that could have dealt with challenges at any level, from the school to the Ministry.

The final line of questioning asked participants what supports they believe needed to be in place in order for a collaborative working environment to develop and thrive. Participants were asked to explain who (or what structure) offers support in creating this type of work environment and who or what assists in the facilitation of a collaborative environment. For this question probes included asking principals about both board and Ministry policy, staffing levels and procedures, support from their supervisory officer and support from the teacher union with whom they work.

Finally principals were asked to reflect on our discussion and asked to share any additional information that they thought was relevant. Most returned to an earlier line of discussion to impart other thoughts.

### **Data Collection**

A small sample of elementary principals were participants in this research study. They were recruited initially through the use of purposive sampling. Twitter and email were ways in which the call for participants was undertaken by the researcher. Once initial participants had been identified and spoken to, snowball sampling was used to increase the number of suitable research study participants. The majority of participants were recruited with the use of snowball sampling.

## Sampling

Sampling in qualitative research involves selecting a small number of individuals to study, who would be good informants and who would provide in-depth insights to the researcher. These selected participants help the researcher understand the phenomenon they are studying. Samples in qualitative research are generally smaller and less representative, than in quantitative research. The in-depth level of data collection found in qualitative research, leads to a smaller sample size (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012). The sampling procedures used in this study, are outlined below.

**Sample size.** Eleven principals were interviewed for this study, until the saturation of data occurred. Ten principals were interviewed initially, with an eleventh principal interviewed at a later date to confirm that data saturation had been reached. Data saturation occurs when no new information is being collected from the participants (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). I was not attempting to generalize the results of these interviews; therefore, a representative sample was not required (King & Horrocks, 2010). The study simply examined the data collected through the interviews and attempted to explain the understanding of the interviewed principals regarding the development of a collaborative work environment.

The small sample size also reflected the inclusion and exclusion criteria for this study. In order to remain consistent, participants were limited to principals who have been in their role for three years and in their work location for a minimum of one year.

**Sampling procedure.** Purposive sampling was used when determining interviewees. In this type of sampling the researcher selects a sample from whom they believe they can learn the most. The participants are chosen because the researcher believes that they will be information

rich cases, who will provide in-depth insights. This method is preferable to one that simply attempts to make generalizations, with little thought put into sampling procedure (Patton, 2015).

In purposive sampling, the researcher creates a list of the essential attributes of the participants and they find people who match these criteria. The criteria chosen, directly reflect the purpose of the study (Merriam, 2009). Clear criteria are required when using this sampling method. The development of the clear criteria assists the researcher in selecting the appropriate study participants. The criteria used for this study were elementary principals who have been in the role for a minimum of three years and who have been at their current school, for a minimum of one year. This type of sampling allows the researcher to use their knowledge and experience when selecting participants (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012).

Snowball sampling is the most common form of purposive sampling. It involves having early study participants refer the researcher to new participants who meet the study criteria (Merriam, 2009). This type of sampling allows for a sufficient number of participants who meet the study criteria to be found, when identifying participants who meet the criteria, can be difficult (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012). At the end of each interview, participants were asked if they knew of other colleagues that would fit the criteria for this study. The research study participants were asked if they would be willing to contact possible participants directly, providing them with the researcher's contact information. This strategy yielded a number of suitable participants for this research study.

***Recruitment.*** Study participants were recruited through purposive sampling, which was based on the researcher's knowledge of the group (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012). There were a number of steps involved in the recruitment of participants for this research study.



Initially, an email invitation was sent out to English public school boards in Ontario, through the Ontario Principals Council, via the professional newsletter sent out each Wednesday by a contact person at OPC. This occurred in September and October of 2015. Elementary principals who had been in the role for a minimum of three years and in their current school for at least one year, were invited to contact me, if they were willing to participate in the study. Excluded were principals who had not spent more than three years in the role of principal and additionally those who had not been in their current work location for a minimum of one year. This excluded principals who had not had time to become comfortable with their current role and location, from participating in the study.

They were asked to participate in a 45-60 minute interview that would be audio recorded. When potential participants initiated contact, a return email was sent to them. This allowed for a mutually convenient interview time and location to be determined. Interviews were then set up with those participants and carried out in a timely manner.

Following the sending out of that email, attempts at recruiting were carried out using Twitter. Both the researcher and her advisor tweeted, seeking suitable research study participants. Information on the topic being studied was shared along with the criteria for participation. Contact information was provided as well. This was done on a weekly basis for a month. Email invitations were also sent out, via the researcher's university e-mail, to possible participants.

Once the initial study participants were identified and interviewed, snowball sampling was used to identify and recruit further research participants. The criteria for participation in this study was shared with the interviewees, and participants were encouraged to refer colleagues, who met that criteria. Study participants contacted colleagues whom they felt were suitable and

shared the researcher's contact information with them. Once a potential participant expressed an interest in being interviewed for this research study, they were sent an email with the study information and an invitation to find a mutually convenient time and location, in which to meet.

Recruitment of interview participants, through snowball sampling, continued throughout the interview process. It continued until the point of data saturation, when no further research participants were required. One final interview was conducted, following the initial completion of data analysis. This was done to confirm that no new information would be gathered by continuing to interview. This final interview validated that the point of data saturation had been reached.

### **Participants**

The participants who took part in this research study were elementary school principals. They were drawn from elementary principals working in elementary schools. They worked in either rural or urban school locations and in the publicly funded school system in southern Ontario. Schools were chosen to attempt to address a variety of aspects of diversity, including school size, location, and diversity amongst the student population. Ten principals were initially interviewed, with another interview completed approximately six weeks after the final interview. This was completed in order to confirm the findings from the earlier interviews.

The group of participants included seven female and four male principals. Their experience as principal ranged from three years to over a decade. While they were all currently working as elementary principals, three individuals had previous experience as secondary teachers, with one having worked as a secondary vice-principal. Two principals worked in schools that could be classified as being in urban areas, four were in charge of schools located in

large towns with populations of 10-20,000, with the remaining four working in schools in small, rural villages. The schools in which the participants worked ranged in size from under 100 students to over 500. The final interview was conducted with a female principal working in a school of over 500 students in a large town. She has been an elementary principal for over a decade. Pseudonyms have been used to identify participants throughout this dissertation. This was done to protect the privacy and retain the anonymity of the interviewees.

### **Key Parameters**

The research undertaken in this study was limited to elementary schools and to elementary principals. The decision to not include vice-principals in this study was a deliberate one. While each elementary school in Ontario has a principal, or at minimum a shared one, each school does not have a vice-principal. This would make comparisons difficult amongst schools, as many aspects of the work of principals are not required of vice-principals. The role of principal is clearly laid out in legislation in Ontario, while the role of vice-principals is not. The Ontario Education Act does not delineate the role of the vice-principal, as it does both the teacher and principal. In reality, the role of vice-principal can be stated simply as “duties as assigned” (Education Act, 1990). There is little to no consistency in the duties assigned to a vice-principal by their supervising principal. The presence of a vice-principal in a school, may also alter the role of the principal, depending on the way in which the administrative duties are shared in each particular location. Focusing solely on schools with one administrator, a principal, allows for a greater level of comparability. For those reasons, the study will focus solely on the role of principal.

## Information on Participants

The following principals were interviewed for this research study. Pseudonyms have been used for each participant.

**Maureen.** Maureen has been a principal for 12 years and has worked in a variety of rural schools, both large and small. Prior to becoming a principal she taught for approximately a decade, primarily in the intermediate grades.

**Marie.** Marie has worked as a principal for six years. She has worked in two urban boards and has taught all grades in the elementary panel over her 22 year career as teacher and administrator.

**James.** James has been an elementary principal for over a decade. Prior to that he worked as a secondary teacher in his current board. He began his career as a teaching VP in a small elementary school on the East Coast.

**Anne.** Anne has worked as an elementary principal for nine years. She has also worked as a secondary vice-principal in two boards and a secondary teacher in northwestern Ontario.

**Alice.** Alice has worked as an elementary principal for the past 3 years. She has also worked as an instructional leader and intermediate teacher for many years.

**Andrew.** Andrew began his career as a teacher with the French language board, subsequently moving to an English language board. He has worked as a principal for more than 10 years.

**Michael.** Michael is currently in the third school in which he has worked as principal. Michael was a classroom teacher in two different school boards, and also worked as a special education teacher and vice-principal.

**Laurie.** Laurie worked as an elementary and secondary teacher prior to moving into administration. She has been a principal for 10 years and at three different schools.

**Susan.** Susan has been a principal for 10 years, in two different schools. She was a vice-principal in a twinned school scenario, which allowed her to gain an understanding of the role of principal. Susan spent 15 years teaching in a variety of elementary grades, before becoming an administrator.

**John.** John has been an elementary teacher for over 20 years. He has taught a variety of grades. He has been a principal for six years.

**Cathy.** Cathy has been an elementary principal for over a decade. Prior to becoming an administrator, she taught a variety of grade levels in the elementary panel, including working as a special education teacher.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed using an inductive process. When data is analyzed in an inductive manner, concepts, hypotheses and or theories are built from the data, rather than testing a predetermined hypothesis as would happen when a deductive process of data analysis is used. The use of an inductive process will allow the researcher to organize the data and develop theories from the observations gathered during the study (Merriam, 2009). The use of an inductive process of data analysis allowed the themes and concepts learned through the interview process to develop based on the interpretations of the researcher. Information regarding how principals understand and develop collaborative work environments, the strategies they use, the supports they require and the challenges they encounter emerged from the data collection

process, rather than there being a hypothesis which attempted to explain these ideas, being developed prior to data collection.

Overall themes that developed through the interview process included principals' understanding of the collaborative working environment, the role and responsibilities of the principal, leadership, support from outside sources, relationship with staff, challenges to collaboration and ways to improve the collaborative environment in schools. These themes will be further explained and expanded upon in upcoming chapters.

Following completion of each individual interview, the audio recording was listened to a number of times, so that I could become familiar with the data. Software was used to play the recordings, allowing for data transcription. A detailed transcript was made, and double checked by re-listening to the recording.

The coding of qualitative data, is the first step in data analysis. It involves the organization of the research findings into categories of information (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012). In order to compile a list of codes, the data transcripts were read and re-read multiple times in order to highlight themes from the findings. Initially smaller themes were identified in the interview transcripts and key words were highlighted. This may have been as small a unit of data as a few words. The data was labelled and coded to reflect the themes and ideas that emerged. This resulted in dozens of codes throughout the transcriptions. The transcripts were then examined as a group, for repeated themes and patterns. Especially relevant were themes and ideas that recurred through multiple interview transcripts.

Smaller themes were then grouped together to form larger ones. Codes that represented similar ideas were amalgamated. The formation of larger, broader themes, made it possible to see repeated patterns that were consistent across numerous interview transcripts. The larger

themes that emerged from the data were then used for the writing of the findings and discussion chapters.

### **Trustworthiness**

Ensuring validity and reliability are important in research. The standards for rigor in qualitative research, differ from that of quantitative research. Validity and reliability are terms more frequently associated with quantitative research (Merriam, 2009). In qualitative research those same ideas are often referred to as trustworthiness. The trustworthiness of a qualitative study can be established by addressing the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of the study and its findings (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012).

### **Credibility**

Credibility in qualitative research refers whether the perceptions of the participants match those that the researcher has portrayed. It forces the researcher to reflect upon whether they have accurately represented the way in which the participants think and feel (Bloomsberg & Volpe, 2008). Credibility indicates that the topic under study was accurately identified and described (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012). There are a variety of ways in which a researcher can assess credibility.

**Member checking.** This involves the sharing of the interview transcript with the interview participants to check for accuracy of transcription and analysis. Interview participants were given the opportunity to comment on any information that they felt did not accurately

represent their remarks. Any changes offered by the participants were reflected in the version of the transcript used when coding the data. This process of member checking is an important way of ensuring there is no misinterpretation of the data collected (Merriam, 2009).

**Other ways to assess credibility.** To demonstrate credibility in this research study, I shared my bias and experiences with the interview participants up front. Discrepant findings were also included in the Findings chapter including ones that were in direct opposition to my understandings.

Finally I made use of my own notes that were made during the interviews. This included information on both verbal and non-verbal interactions. These notes allowed for a fuller version of the interview, including information, such as facial expressions when answering a question. This extra information would not have been evident from the audio recording.

### **Transferability**

Transferability in qualitative research refers to the way in which similar processes may be at work in other settings. The researcher needs to include enough information for the reader to decide whether there is a match between the research context and their own (Bloomsberg & Volpe, 2008). It is up to the reader to decide whether the findings are applicable to him or her (Merriam, 2009).

The way in which to enable the reader to decide whether the findings will be of use to them, is to provide rich descriptions of the study and the context (Bloomsberg & Volpe, 2008). The researcher has included a great deal of background information regarding collaborative work environments as well as detailed descriptions of the participants and their work situations. This



information should allow any readers to determine whether or not their particular circumstances are similar enough to those studied, for them to make use of the findings of this research study.

### **Dependability**

A quantitative study demonstrates its dependability by the ability of others to track the processes and procedures that were used to collect the data (Bloomsberg & Volpe, 2008). It refers to the extent by which the findings of a research study can be replicated. This ability to replicate the findings exactly of a research study is generally not possible in a qualitative study, as different individuals will offer different responses from their various worldviews. Therefore in a qualitative study, dependability examines the idea that the findings in each particular study are reasonable given the data collected (Merriam, 2009).

Bloomsberg and Volpe (2008) suggest the use of an “audit trail” as a way in which qualitative researchers can demonstrate the dependability of their study. This involves providing detailed explanations regarding how the data was analyzed. Merriam (2009) describes the audit trail as a log and suggests that it may be in the form of a research journal. There was an attempt to keep such notes in the completion of this study. Bloomsberg and Volpe (2008) also suggested that researcher notes be made available to anyone wanting to confirm the information collected. Those notes could be provided upon request.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the researcher demonstrates objectivity (Merriam, 2009). It must demonstrate that the findings are shaped by

the research participants and not by the researcher, or any bias that he or she may possess (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability can be confirmed in much the same way as dependability through the use of an audit trail, as described above. Researcher reflexivity can also be a way in which one can demonstrate confirmability. A journal kept by the researcher describing the ways in which decisions were made, logistics of the study and personal reflections can reduce the risk of the appearance of researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As noted above, researcher notes from throughout the process of planning and undertaking this research study could be made available upon request. These notes would assist in demonstrating the thinking behind a variety of decisions that have been made throughout this process.

### **Ethics**

This research study received approval from the Research Ethics Board at Western University. This was deemed to be study with no known risks, where participation was completely voluntary. All participants were able to withdraw at any point during the research process. Participants were informed that there would be an audio recording of the interview that would be used solely for the purpose of transcription. All interview subjects were given a letter of information regarding the research study and were asked to sign a consent form, signifying their willingness to participate.

All information collected for this study was stored on an encrypted device. Pseudonyms were used when recording and coding information, in order to protect the identities of all participants. This information was collected with the understanding that it would be destroyed at

the five year mark, as per the Tri-Council Policy Statement 2 protocol (CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC, 2014).

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

This research study attempted to answer the question, how do principals develop collaborative work environments. The elementary school principals interviewed for this study shared their understandings regarding this topic. The study participants revealed a wide variety of thoughts and opinions on how best to develop such an environment. This chapter explores the themes that emerged out of those interviews. All who were interviewed currently work as elementary school principals in Southern Ontario.

There were a number of themes that arose from the interviews conducted with elementary principals. The beginning of the chapter will outline how the principals interviewed for this study defined a collaborative working environment. It will move on to describe the role of the principal in creating a collaborative working environment, strategies used in creating such an environment, supports received when developing a collaborative work environment as well as the challenges principals encounter. The chapter will finish with suggestions from the principals regarding ways to improve collaborative working environments in schools.

### **Definitions of a Collaborative Working Environment**

Principals interviewed for this study described their understanding of a collaborative working environment in their schools. There were a variety of definitions and understandings offered by the research participants. Susan explained her belief that for a work environment to be a collaborative one, there had to be some rules in place and people must want to participate. “There has to be a number of guidelines or things in place for people to really be collaborative. You know the word respect, mutual goal, something that you’re all dedicated to and wanting to be a part of.” The need for respect to be present in a collaborative work environment was mentioned by a number of principals.

Alice expressed her view of a collaborative working environment as follows:

I think that in a collaborative working environment people feel that their voices and opinions are heard, that they have an influence on decisions that are made within the school and that there is a level of respect. You are free to take some risks in voicing what your opinion is.

The concept of a collaborative working environment being a place where the voices of those working together in the school are heard was shared by many principals.

Laurie explained her view of a collaborative work environment as one where people on staff are working and learning together:

A collaborative working environment is where obviously people are working together. People are learning together. Everybody has input about what it is you will be working on... It's a sharing of ideas, it's sharing learning, sharing research and most importantly I think it is working as equals in a way where the decision making is done together.

Laurie's understanding that teachers working and learning together was an essential component of a collaborative work environment was echoed by Cathy. In her explanation of a collaborative working environment, she expanded on this idea to express the importance of there being a common focus and goal:

Teachers working together hopefully on the same focus. Sharing information and sharing ideas, perhaps doing an inquiry of some kind, not just sitting together in a meeting. They have to have a common focus and be actually working towards a goal.

Cathy shares her belief that teachers simply sitting together in a room, participating in a meeting does not necessarily mean that they are working collaboratively. They must be actively working towards the same goal. The concept of common goals being a focus of a collaborative working environment was mentioned by many principals.

Anne also referred to the concept of the teachers in her school having a common goal, when working in a collaborative manner. She described her vision of a collaborative environment in her school as follows:

In a collaborative environment there's a feeling of everybody is rowing the boat in the same direction. You can have a lot of very different personalities but we share a common goal. We have proactively talked about what that common goal is and that the common goal helps to ground us whenever we are having discussions about whatever it is we need to have discussions about.

The importance of sharing in a common goal in order to develop and sustain such an environment, was echoed by Alice, "I think in a collaborative working environment...everyone has a common goal and a common vision to get where you want to go." Having that common goal is important but that is not to say that it is easy.

Coming up with and agreeing on a common goal can be a challenge. Anne explained that while it is seen as important by all staff at her school, they are not always in agreement about every decision that needs to be made. It takes time and discussion to make these decisions, and it is not always an easy process. While some might advocate for voting on contentious issues, Anne explained that that was not her style. She shared that while it can be difficult, she always works with her staff to get consensus on any particular issue:

We will not be voting on anything. We will be coming to a consensus. If we can't all agree on it then we won't move forward with it but I need to know at the end of the day that we can all live with it and support it, even if you don't necessarily agree with it.

While Anne has found that her staff is able to come together and work towards common goals, even when there is disagreement, this is not always the case. Once a common goal has been developed and consensus has been reached, even those who did not agree, are expected to work towards achieving the goal that has been set by the group.

Maureen explained that this is the case in her school. Teachers are expected to follow along with a group decision, once it has been made:

You're never going to have 100% of the people on board with you all of the time but consensus doesn't mean everybody. Consensus means we're going to move forward as a group and even if one person actually is a dissenting perspective they still have to agree because we around the table agreed that these are the goals we're going to set.

Teachers in the above schools are able to come to consensus and move forward in a collaborative manner, despite not always being in agreement. Assisting the staff in coming to consensus is aspect of the role of the elementary school principal.

### **Role of School Principal**

The role of the school principal is a multi-faceted one. They must fulfill a management role through the running of the school on a day to day basis, while also undertaking an instructional leadership role. Overseeing the creation and sustainment of a positive school culture is also an important role of the elementary school principal.

### **Managing the School**

One of the important roles of the principal is to manage the school on a day to day basis. Teachers can be invited to share in this decision making process. Most principals interviewed shared that they attempt to involve teachers in these decisions, whenever possible.

**Involving teachers in management decisions.** With the exception of a few decisions that must lay in the office, teachers can be involved in most of the day to day decision making that goes along with the running of a school. James explains that this is the way in which he manages his building and how he believes that this management style lends itself to the development of a collaborative work environment:

One thing I can't be is a micromanaging principal... That certainly helps you foster a collaborative mindset because that's what you need to do. To me it's every decision that can possibly be made with your staff and sometimes with your students and community is what I use to guide. Some of those tough ones that I have to make on my own I just try to make sure that enough information is there so if they can't be part of the decision then at least I'm clear and open and up front with them when it has to be a decision that I make.

James' willingness to involve his teaching staff in decision making, was echoed by numerous study participants.

**Managing staff.** A key part of this management role is to manage the staff and their interactions. Schools where teachers are able to work together in a productive manner have a greater possibility of developing collaborative working environments. Many principals interviewed for this study discussed the importance of good working relationships amongst their teaching staff. Anne shared that she felt her current school was the most collaborative she had worked in to date, "It's collaborative because people are wanting to work with one another...It comes from them as a wish." The desire by teachers to work together in a collaborative way, without being forced to, makes it easier for principals to manage that staff and encourage collaboration.

**Encouraging staff collaboration.** John explained that part of his role as principal when developing collaborative working environments is to encourage staff to work together. "My role when I'm going through classrooms is to try to....bridge those so that they feel comfortable and that's really what the focus was last year with one of my teachers." It is part of John's role as an instructional leader to assist in building those professional networks.

**Finding links within staff.** While John's emphasis is focused more on building curricular connections amongst his staff, Marie shared that she sees finding commonalities amongst her staff and the work that they would like to undertake, both in and out of the classroom, as an important aspect of her job:

If somebody says I want to do a such and such night, a math night say, then I might try to link them with the Education Week committee so that it comes under an umbrella, so that it's not like all of these different initiatives all happening and no one really is connecting the dots. So sometimes I might try to connect those dots and link people to have it under



a similar umbrella so that it doesn't feel to staff that we're doing so many different things.

Finding those links amongst her staff, showed how Marie was aware of the number of initiatives and events that may go on at any one time in a school building and that she knew where the priorities of her staff lay. Teachers are often learning new and exciting things during their professional development sessions and they want to share this knowledge. Principals need to demonstrate that they are aware of this and that they are learning along with their staff.

### **Acting as an Instructional Leader**

One of the important roles of the school principal is to act as an instructional leader. This involves working actively with teachers to address instructional needs in a general sense and can involve working with teachers more specifically as it relates to collaboration, as Cathy describes:

My role is to understand enough about program and teaching pedagogy to look for gaps and look for possible next steps, manageable next steps and also look at where there already is good collaboration and where it would be effective to build more collaboration.

Cathy attempts to work with her teachers to identify those needs. A number of principals also explained that part of their role as instructional leader is to offer support to the teachers on their staff from a pedagogical perspective.

**Supporting teachers in the classroom.** Principals need to acknowledge that they are not the ones in the classroom on a daily basis. It is their role to be supportive of teachers and to be instructional leaders, but it is not the same as being in the classroom. Maureen explained that learning with her staff was an expectation from her superintendent:

Going back to the professional development, the superintendents talk to us about learning with your staff and I am. I am interested in learning...I do think it's really important that principals understand and address the fact that we're not in the class.

Principals are encouraged to learn alongside their teachers, but must recognize their limitations, as they are not working in the classroom every day.

John also acknowledged that while he learns along with his staff, his main role is to be supportive of the teachers with whom he works:

If they've got questions too or they don't know where to go as far as getting to a particular point and then it's then giving them what they need as far as how you structure a lesson. Ok so let's do this lesson together, and that would be through my conversation with him so it's at that every ongoing level. Like I'm not teaching grade 1 Math, I'm not teaching those things but he is teaching.

John allowed that while he assists his teachers in goal setting and working through the curriculum, it is ultimately his role to be a facilitator for his staff. He is not in the classroom, teaching on a daily basis. He can be of assistance to his teachers, but does not have the same instructional responsibilities as they do.

Some principals interviewed for this study explained that they are able to recognize when they are unable to meet the needs of their teaching staff themselves; therefore, they take on the responsibility, through their role as instructional leader, to assist in finding effective professional development for their teachers and advocating for their participation.

**Advocating for professional development.** Principals wishing to develop a collaborative working environment must be prepared to advocate on behalf of their teachers when the chance for professional learning, that meets the needs of his or her staff, arises. Anne explained that she is always looking for prospective professional learning for her staff, "My role is to provide space and time for them to collaborate. My job is to advocate when there are opportunities at the board level." Principals must know their teachers well, in order to identify the training that would be valuable to his or her staff.

***Finding learning opportunities.*** Laurie also expressed that part of her role as principal is to find learning opportunities for her staff, even those that the staff may not choose for themselves. She explained she works to encourage staff to develop in areas that they may not initially believe is an area of strength or interest for them:

Because people are in different places, they have different interests. They have different experiences and the other thing is you need to make the opportunities available...You set up the conditions so that people can collaborate. Helping them to nurture healthy relationships, giving them opportunities to take risks, exposing them to different opportunities that are out there...Sometimes you have to give people a bit of a nod or a tap to say, you know what, I think you would enjoy this opportunity – people would learn from you and you would learn. You would bring things back to the school and classroom and your own professional learning. Sometimes people need to be asked. Sometimes people don't volunteer. But when you ask them, it's a compliment and they're encouraged by that.

One must know one's staff well enough as principal, to understand what learning would be valuable to them.

### **Ensuring the Existence of a Positive School Culture**

The school culture is key to the creation of a collaborative working environment as it must be one that is open and willing to work in such a manner. Many principals spoke about the importance of creating and maintaining a positive school culture. Michael explained the importance of the school principal in creating the school culture and how essential it is for the person in the role to be prepared:

The person who has the privilege of being in this seat is a very big factor in creating this environment. So spending the time and making sure that people have the proper credentials to move into the role, is very important.

Michael expressed the idea that by virtue of his or her position in the school, the principal plays a large part in the creation of the school culture.

Marie also felt that an important part of the principals' role was to assist in the development of the school culture. She explained that part of her role as principal, was to create safe spaces in her school. She expressed her belief that she was required to, "Build a culture where people feel they have a voice and they can disagree. They can communicate that disagreement in respectful ways and generate different and alternate solutions." Marie described this as part of the informal role of developing a collaborative working environment in her school. Offering that safe space for staff to feel as though they can express their opinions is important.

### **Strategies Used by Principals to Develop Collaborative Work Environments**

Within the context of the creation of collaborative working environment in schools, principals interviewed for this study described a number of strategies that they use in order to develop or sustain such an environment.

### **Involving Teachers in the Development of this Environment**

Having the teaching staff see things in a particular way does not happen automatically. It takes work. Many principals shared how they work to involve teachers in almost every aspect of the day to day running of the school. This includes involving the development of a collaborative work environment. Michael discussed the way in which he worked to involve everyone in the development of such an environment:

So a collaborative working environment really boils down to collaboration, I suppose, but having an understanding of what collaboration means. Collaboration doesn't mean just collecting facts and making the decision but really valuing all the stakeholders involved in every situation. Having conversations and creating a common understanding and common goals of where we're going for whatever the particular situation is we're trying to look at. Bringing all the facts and data into play prior to making our decision based on this collaborative approach.

Michael explained how he consults with all staff, not only teaching staff, when collecting information and opinions whenever a decision needs to be made. He shared how he felt this sharing of information was key to the development and sustainment of the collaborative working environment in his school. Michael also expressed that listening to his teachers was an important strategy in the development of a collaborative working environment.

### **Listening to Teachers**

Being an effective listener is a key part of creating that safe environment for one's staff. Most principals interviewed for this study explained that being effective listeners, when dealing with their teaching staff, was important. When people feel safe, they are more likely to work together collaboratively. Michael explained the importance of being a good listener as principal:

The reality is, to be successful in this role, you really need to be able to listen very sincerely to others and by listening I mean hear what they are saying but understand what they are saying and ask for clarification.

Listening to one's staff, as Michael has shared, is an important aspect of his role as principal in building a collaborative working environment in his school. It is up to him, as principal, to ensure staff concerns are heard and acted upon.

Anne also stressed the importance of listening to her staff and helping them to problem solve, as one of the most important aspects of her role as principal, one that she has actively worked to improve:

I have had several teachers say to me, you're a really good listener. And that's because I have practiced it. I've learned about it and I've made a point of learning about it and made of a point of being conscious of it...But at the end of the day everybody needs to feel like they've been heard because that's often enough to solve the problem without anything further needing to be done. My job is to listen and ask good coaching questions and probably eight times out of ten the person I am having the conversation with comes up with a solution on their own. They just needed a sounding board. That's my job.

Listening to one's staff, and hearing their concerns is only one of the ways in which the principal communicates with his or her staff.

### **Communicating with Teachers**

While being an effective listener was mentioned by multiple participants as important to their role as principal, being a good communicator was brought up a number of times as well. James stressed the importance of communication with his staff, "Communication. Communication is huge. I do a daily memo with my staff...it saves me time because it becomes the number one way I communicate with staff." It is clear James believes that consistent communication with his staff is critical.

**Two way communication.** While James ensures that he communicates information on a daily basis to his staff, Maureen shared her view on the importance of communicating information not only to her staff but in hearing what they have to say as well, "...two way communication and a very open communication so we are working together in all areas and all levels of the school. I say we, being myself and the staff." For Maureen, receiving communication from her staff is as important as her sharing information with her teachers.

**Filtering of information.** Listening to and working with the staff allows the principal to filter information to their staff, as required. Often there is a great deal of communication that flows from not only the Board Office but also the Ministry of Education. Principals interviewed for this study shared that one of their important responsibilities was to act as a filter for some of this information. This allowed the staff to focus on what was important in their teaching and tended to reduce overall levels of stress. James explained his way of filtering this material as follows:

Another thing is a lot of times we need to be an umbrella for the staff. You kind of filter out the things they need to know. Sometimes the message from the Board Office, instead of just forwarding it, taking it and writing in my words and language that I know will still get the information to my staff, but either soften it or change it so that it's not misinterpreted.

This filtering of information demonstrates how well James knows his staff, and shows his understanding regarding how they will receive and interpret it.

### **Use of Distributed Leadership Approach**

The concept of distributed leadership in schools complements the idea of a collaborative working environment in a school. The use of this approach to leadership can be an important strategy used by principals. While there may be certain times when the principal must be the final decision maker in a situation, or an issue arises that requires their exclusive leadership, many components of day to day life and decision making in elementary schools can be shared with staff.

**Shared decision making.** Sharing the decision making with the teachers in the school assists in the development of a collaborative working environment. When decisions are made cooperatively, all teachers are more likely to buy in and support those decisions. Andrew explained his beliefs regarding shared decision making in his school:

I'm a strong believer that it is not my school. You will never hear me – I never use the term as principal "my school, my staff, my students". It's our school. It's always inclusive. The staff participates in all the decision making.

Having teachers participate in that decision making can lead to greater ownership for all involved.

Maureen shared that she involves her teachers in the decision making process all year long and regarding any number of topics, whether large or small:

So everything from what the first day of school looks like to the direction that your professional development is going to go needs to be something that is talked about and I feel it's really important to get staff input.

Working together to make decisions not only increases the sense of personal ownership teachers feel in their workplace, but it can also lessen the workload for each of the members of the school staff.

**Shared workload.** Principals have an incredible workload, and they often work in isolation. Sharing decision making can lighten that load. Given the fact that so many schools only have single administrators, it is almost a necessity to share the workload with the teaching staff. Laurie explained her point of view in regards to being the only administrator in her school, "You can't do it on your own and it is difficult in schools with single administrators, which lots of our schools are. You have to work with leaders that are on your staff already." Every school has people who demonstrate leadership abilities in any number of ways. It is the job of the principal to recognize them.

**Identifying teacher leaders.** In order to share the leadership in an effective way in one's school, the principal must be prepared to identify staff members with leadership abilities in their building, and assist in capacity building amongst their teachers. Susan shared that it is critical for principals to get to know their teachers, in order to facilitate this process, "Look for the strengths within your people because there are some people who have strengths that you maybe aren't even aware they have." Sometimes people's fortes are not obvious at first. It can take time for those strengths to become evident.

The ability to identify people's strengths is one reason why building relationships with the teaching staff is so important for a principal. They need to get to know the abilities and leadership qualities of the teachers in their school. Susan went on to explain that in her view,



everyone in the school is a leader in some sense, “Everyone in this building is a leader. We have our people who are advocates for sports within our building. They are leaders in that way. They are leaders with the kids every day.” Recognizing that and building those relationships is key for a principal.

### **Developing Relationships with Staff**

Having a strong relationship with one’s staff is a crucial aspect of a principal’s ability to develop and sustain a collaborative working environment in his or her school. Without a positive working relationship between teachers and administrator, it is unlikely a collaborative working environment will develop.

**Being available.** Building those relationships with one’s teaching staff means that the principal needs to be available to them. This is required in order to gain the trust of one’s staff.

Maureen shared her philosophy on being available:

People talk about an open door policy. Well what does that mean? It means that if someone needs to speak to me and close the door, then I am happy to do that. In the meantime, this happens a lot. End of the day people need to debrief, people need to touch base and people need to talk to you. I’m not going to ignore that. Be out. Be talking. Be available to people.

As previously mentioned, Maureen explained how important it is to her for her teachers to communicate information to her, not just receive information from her. In her opinion, that two way communication is critical to gaining the trust of the staff and building relationships with them.

**Gathering feedback.** While Maureen felt that giving her teachers the opportunity to come to her when they needed to talk was most effective, Susan used a different tactic in

showing her availability and vulnerability to her staff. She decided to ask her staff for feedback on her leadership style:

I put a survey out and they could anonymously answer the survey. I shared that. Some of that wasn't easy to hear. Some of it was. But I shared it all, for them to realize I was willing to open myself up and be vulnerable.

While that may not be the most common method of gathering information and feedback from one's staff, it did demonstrate Susan's commitment to working with her staff and developing and improving their working relationship. Such a survey would be difficult to do when a principal first arrives in a school, when an administrator-teacher relationship had not yet been developed.

**Working in a new school.** Principals need to take time when they arrive at a new school to get to know staff and learn about the culture of their particular school. Andrew explained the process of beginning at a new school as follows:

Rule of thumb, for the first six months, look listen and feel. That's one of the basics, first rule of thumb that you learn in the PQP – don't change things in the first six months in the school. Just take a step, observe the culture, look at who your key players are, who your struggling teachers are, who needs extra support and in which area.

For Andrew, taking a step back and almost taking on the role of observer was the way in which he begins his time in a new school.

When a principal first arrives at a school he or she cannot expect to build a collaborative environment immediately. He or she must take the time to learn about their staff. Relationships need to be built. Michael described the way in which he begins to build relationships when he starts at a new school:

So I think everything is about relationships, and you have to take time when you come into a building to build relationships at every level: students, staff, volunteers, and the whole school community. You have to take time to get to know people. I go back to you have to be genuinely interested in people and care about people.

Relationship building is important when a principal arrives at a new school, but it must continue throughout one's time in a building.

**Consistently Building Relationships.** Relationships between the principal and teachers must be fostered no matter how long a principal has worked in a school. Anne explained that while relationship building is especially important when a principal is new to a school, it is always critical to work on building relationships with the staff:

So coming into any new building, part of your plan has to be about relationship building. That's probably the most important thing to me, is the relationships, which is why my desk looks the way it does. There's piles of paper, lots of them. But I think that's my focus regardless if it's my first year, my fifth year, or my tenth year. It's about relationships.

Relationship building continues as long as a principal is in a school. There are often new staff members in a school, who will not have built up the trust level with the principal and other teachers that returning staff members may have developed.

**Developing trusting relationships.** Part of building relationships with the staff includes working towards developing a trusting relationship not only amongst the teachers but between the principal and his or her staff. As Susan shared, trusting relationships can vary within the building, amongst the staff:

I have been here for six years. We have done a number of wonderful things but in the last few years I think we've all noticed that there are some relationships within the building that aren't as trusting as other relationships.

While principals can assist in trying to strengthen those relationships within the school, they will not always be successful.

***Trusting relationships between principals and teachers.*** Principals have lesser amounts of control over relationships that exist amongst staff and a greater amount of control regarding their own relationship and level of trust between themselves and their teaching staff. James

shared his belief that, “I trust my teachers like fellow educators until they give me repeated reasons not to. That’s the only way. I can’t do it another way.” Treating his staff like professionals has been one way in which James has demonstrated his trusting relationship with the teachers in his school.

There are other ways in which a principal can show that he trusts his teachers. Andrew explained that one way in which he works to build trusting relationships with his staff is to make it clear that he does not have all of the answers, and that he is learning and making mistakes along with them:

Be human. It’s ok to make mistakes. It’s not because you’re the principal that you don’t make mistakes. It’s ok to say this is new ground, when it’s something you’re not knowledgeable about, to say that you need to go get the answers.

Admitting one does not have all of the answers, displays a level of vulnerability to the staff.

That is indicative of a relationship built on trust.

***Demonstrating support.*** Another way in which principals establish trusting relationships with their staff is to demonstrate support for them, in a variety of ways and situations. Alice expressed that when prompted, her staff asked for her to demonstrate her support to them in the following way, “They wanted to know that I had their backs. That if a situation happened that I was going to be supporting them. So that creates that emotional safety within and the trust.”

Admitting to feeling supported by one’s administrator is another example of a trusting relationship between teachers and their principal.

Andrew also explained the importance of staff feeling supported by their principal and how he works to demonstrate that support when dealing with parents:

I will advocate for the teachers behalf in front of parents, as I wouldn’t want the staff to lose face. But I will share with the staff my thoughts on the situation. My rule of thumb is always I will back anyone up if you can show me why you’ve done, explain why you’ve done what you’ve done.

This assistance from the principal when dealing with parents, and in other difficult situations, allows the teachers to feel as though they are working with, and for, someone who is willing to support them and whom they can trust. In order for principals to develop and sustain collaborative working environments in schools, they must not only give support but also receive it in a variety of ways.

### **Supports Received when Developing Collaborative Work Environments**

When principals are working towards developing and sustaining collaborative working environments in their schools, support from a variety of people and entities, can make the process a lot easier. These supports may be available to them within their own school, or they may be from people and organizations outside of the school.

#### **Support from Board**

The first, and perhaps most crucial avenue of support, comes from the school board in general and one's superintendent in particular. Most principals interviewed for this study shared that they felt supported by their superiors at the board level. Marie expressed the fact that she felt much supported in this area:

I think our board and certainly our own superintendent is very supportive. We have monthly superintendent meetings that spend a lot of time on program and collaboration as colleagues, as administrators as well as building that with our staff.

Demonstrated support from senior administration assists in feeling confident in one's role.

While James shared that he does feel supported by his supervisory officer, he admitted that the level of support may vary amongst the different superintendents across the board. His other principal colleagues, may not experience the same level of support:

There is different levels of support and I think one of the challenges, the same as teachers can have principals with very different styles, is you've got five different superintendents in five different areas and that support can look very different.

Principals realize as well that they cannot work in isolation. Each principal in a board would therefore not expect to have the same level of encouragement and/or assistance as their colleagues, when dealing with different superintendents. Those principals may turn to their colleagues for support when required.

### **Support from Other Principals**

One of the places he or she may look to when in need of support is their principal colleagues. Alice explained that that is to whom she often looks when she requires assistance:

You have to have your own connections with other principals. When I am not sure about a decision I am making with my staff, given the information I am getting from them, I bounce ideas off of other leaders as well.

While as a newer principal Alice depends on her colleagues to reassure her in her decision making process, as a more experienced administrator, James often acts as a mentor for fellow colleagues. He shared why he felt that support network was important in assisting in developing collaboration, "The collaboration from me extends even beyond my staff here. It's a lot of collaboration with other, with colleagues...It is more of a social supportive collaboration." Principals at different points in their career, may have different types of support to offer their colleagues.

## **Support from Union**

One other area of support that can assist the principal in developing and sustaining collaborative working environments in their schools, is a positive relationship with his or her ETFO (Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario) school steward. Laurie explained that she often has had good working relationships with the steward in her school:

In some schools ETFO plays more of a role than in other schools in the sense that they are a stronger leadership presence and I believe in collaboration. I believe that the federation rep and the principal should be working collaboratively all the time.

A positive relationship between the ETFO steward and the school administration benefits both the teaching staff and the principal. In some instances ETFO can also be seen as a challenge to collaboration, from the perspective of the principal.

## **Challenges to Collaboration**

Study participants shared a number of barriers to collaboration that they have faced in their attempts to develop or sustain a collaborative working environment in their schools. Some challenges occurred specifically in their schools and within their staff, while others were due to outside forces that were often out of their control.

### **School Size**

One challenge that was frequently mentioned by principals, was the size of his or her school. Principals who were in charge of large schools found this to be a challenge to creating a collaborative environment, as Anne explained:

I have no problems with taking the time but when you move from a building that has 12 teachers to a building that has 27 teachers it's hard to devote the same quantity of time to each person because there just aren't that many hours in a day.

Michael shared similar struggles in creating a collaborative working environment in his large school. He explained that there is not enough time in a larger building, to work with individuals:

It's the time needed to help, sometimes to help people move towards more of a growth mindset, I think, would probably be the challenge. It's the time. In a big building like this, it is hard to see everyone every day and have a conversation every day to foster those good relationships.

When there is a large number of teachers and support staff in a school, the time required by the principal to foster those positive relationships and build collaboration is increased.

The belief mentioned by some principals that a common focus is required to develop a collaborative working environment in one's school is also challenged by the size of the school.

Cathy explained her difficulty in this area as the principal of one of the largest elementary schools in her board:

When you have such a large staff it's really hard to find one focus. What can help in building the collaborative structure and relationships is to have one goal, especially when you're trying to get divisions to blend together better. That's been a big challenge in getting everybody to find one focus that will work for all.

Finding agreement amongst 65 teachers would arguably be more challenging than getting six teachers to come to an agreement.

While the challenges may not be the same as those that occur in larger schools, Alice shared that there are challenges to developing and sustaining a collaborative working environment in a smaller school as well, "There's different challenges with a big school and a small school. With a small school that culture is very, very ingrained and small changes in a small school are really, really big." Challenges to collaboration can be found at both ends of the school size spectrum. Creative solutions to these issues can be developed in any sized school.

**Finding solutions.** Principals shared that one thing that they attempt to do is to find the time for teachers to be able to collaborate together, when requested. Being a principal in a



smaller school, has meant that James has had to be more creative in coming up with ways for teachers to work collaboratively:

You try other things like, we have a kindergarten team here, so I'm going to try to get them to go to (school) spend a half a day, use some funds that I really don't have, to send them there. You know and provide those opportunities, like on PA days if numeracy is a focus I don't need my Ojibwa teacher, my French teacher, my planning time teacher who does mostly drama, dance, music to be part of that numeracy thing. So I try to find creative ways.

Allowing teachers to meet with colleagues in other schools, helps to alleviate the challenge of small schools. Unfortunately this comes at a cost, as the teacher needs to be released from their teaching duties in order to do this. The ability to be more flexible in timetabling can alleviate some of these issues in a larger school.

**Scheduling.** Teacher scheduling and the principal's ability to offer common preparation time was mentioned by a number of principals. Many principals work in smaller schools and are simply unable to schedule in a way that makes freeing up grade-alike teams possible. Alice expressed her frustration with this issue, "One challenge we have here, because it is so small, in creating a collaborative environment is that teachers miss having a grade-alike partner to share ideas and collaborate with." This is another way in which school size creates challenges to the development of collaborative working environments in schools.

**Staffing.** The staffing allocation can also be a barrier to creating a collaborative working environment, especially in a smaller school. In schools, French is often the way in which preparation time is delivered in the junior and intermediate grades. In a smaller school there will only be one French teacher, so only one person can be out of their classroom at a time. Often there are a number of part-time teachers assigned to a school as well, increasing the timetabling challenges. John shares his frustration in creating a workable timetable, where teachers could have the opportunity to collaborate on a regular basis:

In our school you've got French driving planning time for the juniors and then I've got pieces. I've got teacher pieces that I have to – a .35 and .5 as far as complement but then everyone is full time. It's trying to get those pieces together. It does not allow for me to create a timetable.

Having to work within the limits of the staff allocation in a school, can make it more difficult to create an environment where teachers are able to easily collaborate.

## Teachers

The teachers in a school, play a large role in the creating of a collaborative working environment. In order for a school to have a collaborative working environment, the teaching staff must be on board.

**Staff Reluctance.** Most principals shared that there has been some reluctance among teachers on their staff to work collaboratively. Susan expressed that there have been challenges in developing a collaborative working environment in her school, due to the differing opinions of staff, “Unless everybody has the same thought and the same wish and desire, it's really difficult to make it a true, true collaborative working environment.” So while the principal is key in creating the collaborative working environment in a school, the entire staff needs to be on board for true collaboration to occur.

James explained that he has faced many of the same challenges in attempting to encourage teachers on staff to be open to collaboration:

I think so often, the biggest block to collaboration is that people who are stuck and you spend a lot of time trying to move those people and get them into a situation where collaboration is at least considered, that they are willing to try that type of thing.

In the above quote, James described teachers who were unwilling to consider working collaboratively for whatever reason. That is not the only way in which teachers can create difficulties when developing a collaborative work environment in a school.

While the behaviour of the teachers described above is a definite challenge to collaboration, those teachers James is referring to are unwilling themselves to collaborate. There are teachers on staff, who may go one step further and actively encourage others not to collaborate. Maureen shared her experience with teachers on her staff, “A person can be very negative, can be behind the scenes talking things down versus talking things up...who might be undermining what we’re doing and saying.” These staff members can be very tricky for principals to get on board.

**Personality conflicts.** While a reluctance to collaborate can mean that a principal has one or two challenging teachers to deal with, another issue that can be a definite barrier to collaboration are the personality conflicts that can arise. Everyone will not always get along. This can be a challenge, particularly when those people must work together as a function of their role. Marie explained how this has been an issue for her:

In particular grade teams perhaps there may be some people that don’t get along with some other people on the team. Some people work better with other people than others. Some people don’t really like to work with other people.

Personality conflicts in a school may unfortunately never be resolved. There will always be people who will not get along. They must attempt to find ways to work together and come to agreements despite their conflicts.

Maureen explained that teachers on larger staffs, or those who have worked together for a significant amount of time, often are unwilling to become collaborative with new people:

In a larger staff you do get pockets of people that work together well and pockets that don’t. That is impossible to get past...An incredibly cliquey staff is hard and that’s when you try to seek those people that can maybe merge between the groups.

Finding that balance between encouraging and forcing collaboration can be a challenge for principals.

While all of the above are challenges that principals must contend with amongst their teaching staff, many challenges to the creation and sustainment of collaborative working environments come from outside the school. These challenges often involve stakeholders in the education community.

## **Parents**

When interviewed, a few principals mentioned parents as a potential challenge to collaboration. While parents are encouraged to participate fully in the education of their children, they can be a source of conflict in a school. Andrew shared that parents are one of biggest barriers to collaboration in his building:

It's the role of the parent. It's getting more and more complicated because parents want to take so much of the decision making process as to what's taking place within the classroom or what's taking place within the school.

Parents play an increasingly large role in their children's school communities and their influence is often felt, both positively and negatively.

## **Union**

Another education stakeholder that could be a barrier to collaboration in schools was the teacher federations (unions) and their role in possible labour unrest in elementary schools. A few principals shared that this has been a challenge for them in the past. While it is not a consistent challenge, as contract negotiations and therefore labour disruptions, are not always ongoing, Marie admitted that it has been a barrier to collaboration, "And of course another challenge can be work sanctions and federation at key points in time." While Marie expressed the opinion that the federation creates a challenge to the development and sustainment of a collaborative working

environment at particular times, such as during a work to rule phase of labour negotiations,

Laurie explained that the teacher federation with whom she works (Elementary Teachers

Federation of Ontario) was sometimes a more consistent barrier to collaboration in her school:

There's some rigidity in terms of ETFO thinking. So if you set up some sort of collaborative environment but in doing so you can't honour all of the conditions that ETFO members think they should be receiving, so there's a difference, in other words there's a difference between what ETFO is saying to their members and what the group providing the opportunities is offering...If it's not supported by ETFO or encouraged or valued by federation then it's hard, sometimes it's hard to get going.

While this may indeed be a challenge to collaboration, both parties (the school board and the teacher federation) are bound to follow the terms of the collective agreement which they both signed.

**Regulation 274.** Some principals also felt as though ETFO was the reason behind another of the frequently mentioned barriers to creating a collaborative working environment in their schools, Regulation 274. This regulation places a number of restrictions on the hiring process in schools, with seniority playing a much larger role in hiring, than prior to the enactment of this regulation. Marie expressed some frustration with the Regulation, "Regulation 274 which certainly makes us feel a little bit strapped in terms of any hiring decisions. We have such limited options now." Some principals interviewed for this study shared that this regulation has made it harder for them to create a collaborative working environment in their school, as they now have little decision making power regarding who they are able to hire.

Prior to the implementation of this Regulation a less senior teacher who may have been, in their opinion, a better fit could have been hired, this is no longer the case. Andrew shared that he, along with other colleagues, had been given the impression that it was ETFO that had pushed for this regulation to be implemented, "One of my biggest peeves, is that Regulation 274. We're told that it's ETFO that really wants this Regulation." Principals were clearly under the

impression that it was ETFO who had pushed for this regulation to be implemented. They felt that it was another way that the teacher federations could be seen to be intervening in their schools.

## **Time**

The most commonly mentioned challenge to the development and sustainment of collaborative working environments in schools was time. James put it simply, “A challenge has been simply the amount of time we get to do things together.” The lack of time, for any number of reasons, was frequently mentioned by the interview participants as a barrier to creating and sustaining a collaborative working environment in their schools.

As Cathy explained, “We never have enough time to do this stuff. It takes time to play with stuff and learn. Without that – what can you do in an hour staff meeting once a month? How collaborative can we get?” The lack of time to work together is challenging in many ways. When prompted for ways in which the collaborative working environment in schools could be improved, time was among those responses as well.

## **Ways to Improve Collaborative Working Environments in Schools.**

A number of suggestions were offered by principals, as ways in which to improve the collaborative working environments in their schools. Some of these ideas could be implemented by the principals themselves, while others would require assistance and/or permission from the school board or Ministry of Education.

## **Time**

The most repeated suggestion by principals interviewed for this study regarding ways to improve the collaborative working environment in their schools, was to give them more time. The principals requested time to work together as a staff, time to do professional development and time to work on the myriad of initiatives the Board and Ministry require. When asked how best to improve the collaborative working environment in her school, Alice stated, “If we had time to meet together more regularly I think that would be helpful. I don’t know what that looks like.” The request for more time, without a vision of how it would be implemented was a common response from participants.

## **Funding**

Tied in with the concept of time, as is often the case in schools, is funding. Allowing more time to work collaboratively as a staff would require a greater allocation of funds to the school in the form of release time. If teachers were to have more preparation time during the week, which may allow for more collaborative planning, a larger number of teachers would need to be hired. Again, that would require a greater level of funding from the Ministry of Education.

Anne explained the challenge:

In an ideal world it would be nice if included in the budget from the Ministry to the Board and then from the Board to the schools, if there was an allocation for staff development. And there isn’t. We get our school budgets and we have to allocate them as best we can.

She went on to explain what she would do with a larger school budget. “If I had a bigger budget I could release teachers more often. I could call in a principal to deal with the day to day management stuff so I could be with my teachers and do more co-learning.”

Being able to work with the teachers during the day was a common request shared by those interviewed.

The reduction in available funds for Professional Learning Communities (PLC) in their schools this year, was mentioned by some principals. As Cathy shared, “The board believes we need to be collaborative but the PLC money has disappeared. That was huge in getting people to work collaboratively because it gave people the time to do it.” Without the time to meet during the school day, opportunities to work collaboratively are limited.

### **Use of Professional Activity Days**

One suggestion offered by more than one principal in this study, was to examine the use of Professional Activity days. John suggested that might be a way to increase the amount of time available for his staff to meet as a group:

The other option, which would save money and time is increasing the number of PA days. If you’re going to look at something as far as from a cost, to increase the number of PA days.

James also expressed that more PA days, or simply a re-allocation of their function, might give an opportunity for more professional development time for his staff. He did not think that it was an option that was likely to be implemented in the near future:

It’s great that there are two PA days for teachers to do report cards on, but those would have been two days we had before to work together. I don’t know what that looks like going forward. I don’t imagine that there is going to be more of them.

An additional PA day was in fact added to the school year, to discuss health and safety and Ministry initiatives, since the completion of this interview.



## **Scheduling**

When asked about scheduling, Andrew shared that he allows his teaching staff to decide on their levels of collaboration, giving them some autonomy based on their comfort levels:

Scheduling is not easy...Some people are strong advocates for team teaching, others are not. What I do, usually I don't do schedules...Usually they work it out amongst themselves. It's all based on the premise that the prep teacher is not to work in silos but to work with the classroom teacher because everything is to be integrated.

Andrew is willing to give some autonomy to teachers on his staff when developing what their timetable and teaching load might look like.

## **Autonomy**

Many principals expressed a desire for greater autonomy for themselves and their role.

Laurie commented that she felt that she knew her school and staff best and could better determine their learning needs, if given the opportunity:

So I think principals in general would like more autonomy in their jobs in terms of this is what we're working at in this school right now, because this is what we believe as a group of professionals working together that we need to work on.

Principals communicated that they were best able to ascertain what professional learning would be beneficial for their staff.

In the same vein, a common desire mentioned by principals was to not only have fewer initiatives required by the Ministry of Education, but also to be able to decide which initiatives were a best fit for their schools and staff. Susan explained that she knows her staff best but asked the question, "How do you say no to initiatives that you've been told to do, that doesn't quite fit with what you are working on?" The lack of control over these initiatives was a complaint frequently repeated.

## **Greater Consistency**

Initiatives required to be completed in schools could originate at a Board or a Ministry level. Principals would like to see more consistency amongst all of these ideas, from all levels. John expressed that he would like for there to be greater alignment between the Board and the school, “You look at the Board improvement plan and it just seems like it’s in isolation. Like schools – even last year schools were looking at literacy but the boards were saying Math.” Better communication regarding these initiatives among all levels – the school, the board and the Ministry – would be appreciated by principals.

## **Teacher Mobility**

Finally, one way some principals thought that they may be able to improve the collaborative working environment in schools, was to allow for greater teacher mobility. Maureen shared, “There are times when I have thought to myself, this person needs a change and I have no avenue to facilitate it.” James agreed with that statement, saying that in his experience a lack of staff turnover in a school can be a challenge, “Unfortunately I think sometimes staffs can be in the building too long. There needs to be movement.” James went on to explain that he thought the greatest way to improve his ability to develop a collaborative working environment in his school, would be a way in which to facilitate greater teacher movement:

I think the biggest wish list would be the ability not to move problems but to create more opportunities for movement that I think teachers might not realize that they need as well...I think there could be real positives of people going to another place and finding out that, wow, there are different ways of thinking and I’m not always with the same group of three or four people that think in a certain way and they are so resistant to change and stuff as a result.

Given the tightly defined staffing and transfer procedures found in most collective agreements, it is unlikely that this type of movement would be possible on a broad scale. Except for in extreme cases of severe personality conflicts or medical needs, teacher movement is generally always teacher initiated.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

In the previous chapter, the findings resulting from semi-structured interviews with elementary principals regarding how they understood collaborative working environments were explained. There were many common themes shared by the interview participants, with some less frequent ideas and thoughts stated by the elementary principals. In this chapter, the ideas and themes shared by the research participants will be linked to the research literature and discussed in relation to the research question and sub-questions.

### **Principals Understanding of a Collaborative Working Environment**

A collaborative work environment is one where everyone is working towards a common goal and common understandings. Effective teaching and learning is a primary goal of a collaborative school (Scott & Smith, 1987). It is a respectful environment where teachers feel as though they are part of a team (Allensworth, 2012). While all teaching staff members need to be willing participants in the collaboration that is to occur amongst staff and with administrators, the principal has the ultimate responsibility to set the tone in their school and to set a clear focus (Leithwood & Fullan, 2012). Effective principals understand that it is important to not only support the development of a collaborative working environment in his or her school, but also to participate in the development of such an environment (Sindhi, 2013; Mitchell & Castle, 2005). The principals interviewed for this study understood the unique role that they must play in the creation of such an environment.

## **Role of Principal**

The elementary school principal is important to the development and sustainment of a collaborative work environment in his or her school. Without the support of the school administrator, it is unlikely that a collaborative structure will develop (Leithwood & McAdie, 2007). In order for a principal to be successful in the creation of a collaborative work environment, they must not only have an understanding of what one entails, but also have knowledge regarding the concepts of teacher and distributed leadership (Mangin, 2007).

Principals have multiple roles to play in a school. They need to manage the day to day operations of the building, which includes managing the staff (both teaching and non-teaching). They have an instructional leadership role to assume, where they need to ensure the learning and pedagogical needs of the teachers are met. The development and sustainment of a positive school culture is also part of the principal's role. The establishment of this positive school climate is something that the principal should be constantly working towards (Osman, 2012). While it is not only the actions of the principal that determine whether an environment is a positive one or not, one of the most important determinants is the school principal (Minckler, 2014). Each of the varied roles of the principals helped to determine if a work environment was collaborative.

**School management.** Principals who involve teachers in the day to day running of the school are more likely to develop collaborative work environments. Consulting with teachers on those smaller issues, as well as the focus for collaboration in the school, has a positive impact on the perception of teachers regarding their work and their collaboration with others (Direction, 2014). Most principals interviewed for this study stated that it was common practice for them to

share the majority of the decision making with their teaching staff. There were very few instances when this was not deemed possible.

An important aspect of the management role of the school principal involves managing staff. This can be a challenging aspect of the principal's role. In some bigger schools, there can be nearly 100 staff members (both teaching and non-teaching) and that is a large number of relationships to manage. All schools and teachers within schools differ in the way that they interact (Moolenaar, 2012). The way in which a principal dealt with teaching staff at a particular worksite, may not be effective at a different one. The principal must find the best way to manage and encourage these relationships amongst teachers. The principal will set the tone for these relationships between staff members (Kruse & Louis, 2009).

For any number of reasons, there are often teachers who do not wish to work collaboratively. It is especially those teachers that the principal needs to reach and cultivate relationships with, as by building relationships with those disconnected teachers, the chance of creating a collaborative environment increases (Fullan, 2002).

Inherent in school management is the requirement of the principal to recognize that while operating in a collaborative manner and sharing leadership in the school is important, there is still formal authority embedded in their role as school principal. Many members of the staff will still recognize the positional power of those in administrative roles (Leithwood, 2012). This formal authority may act as a challenging factor in building trusting relationships with the staff, who may see the school principal solely as their superior and not as someone with whom they can truly collaborate.

**Instructional leadership.** The school principal is the instructional leader in the building. Principals should develop a sense of the individual professional goals and learning needs of each

of their teachers (Crum, Sherman & Myran, 2010). The study participants shared that they understand their role to be one of facilitation. They are there to facilitate the learning for their teaching staff, as they are not the ones in the classroom on a daily basis. It was also explained that they understand their limitations and when they are unable to meet the professional learning needs of their teachers themselves, they undertake the task of finding appropriate professional learning for their teaching staff. The principals will advocate for the teachers' participation in such learning. They explained that this was part of their role as an instructional leader.

In finding what the principal believes is appropriate professional learning, this may even involve suggesting learning opportunities for their teachers that they would not choose for themselves. The principal may see an area of strength or interest in a teacher, which they themselves don't see. This comes back to the idea shared by Crum, Sherman and Myran (2012) that principals should develop an understanding of the learning needs of their teaching staff. A principal must know their teachers well, in order to be able to understand their professional learning needs.

### **One Common Vision**

When principals are working to develop a collaborative working environment in their schools, having all of the staff members come together to develop a common vision for the school is key. The principal and the teachers must decide upon and work towards common goals and develop a shared sense of purpose. When teachers in collaborative working environments support a shared sense of purpose they are more likely to develop into networks of supportive professionals (Peterson, 1994).

The development of a collaborative work environment cannot be imposed upon the teaching staff. The learning community will not be as effective if participation in a collaborative

working environment is coerced (Dickerson, 2011). In the previous chapter a participant explained that he believed that in order for there to be true collaboration in a school, common understandings and common goals needed to be developed by the entire staff. His approach was to make decisions in the school based on this collaborative approach, with a sharing of information and opinions by the teaching staff. He believed that style of decision making helped to develop and sustain the collaborative environment in his school. This consultation with teachers regarding collaboration in a school has a positive impact on their willingness to collaborate with others (Harris et al., 2013).

**Goal setting.** While the principal may have his or her own idea regarding what the school goals could and should be, in a collaborative work environment it is the principal who sets the conditions for others to establish the goals, rather than being the one who sets the goals themselves (Kohm and Nance, 2009). When the principal makes the effort to guide his or her staff in this process of goal development, they are modelling the collaboration that is expected of the teaching staff (McLeskey and Waldron, 2010). While it may not be possible for all staff members to come to an agreement regarding the school goals, the process of developing these goals was still seen as an important aspect of having a collaborative work environment, by the research study participants.

**Time together.** Time is always at a premium in schools, but in order for a collaborative working environment to be developed and sustained, much time is required. There needs to be time allocated for teachers to work together in a meaningful way. This does not mean that they are to sit together in a staff meeting and then walk back to their individual classrooms. Teachers need extended periods of time to work together in order to work collaboratively (Khorsheed, 2007).



This time needs to be built into the school's schedule and the yearly calendar (Kruse, Louis & Bryk, 1994; Honawar, 2008). Meeting together during professional activity days and having some release time during the year is a starting point (Sever & Bowgren, 2007). Ideally teachers would have regular meetings, with at minimum their grade-alike partners, to learn and work together in a collaborative way (Khorsheed, 2007). Many study participants expressed frustration with the lack of time the staff was able to meet for professional learning over the course of a school year.

Time to work together to develop and sustain a collaborative working environment is important but there is another important factor regarding time and such environments. A collaborative work environment takes time to develop. It can be a process that takes multiple years to mature. Principals who participated in this study stated their agreement with this idea. It was shared that those who have had success in developing a collaborative work environment in their school were not successful in doing so immediately upon arrival. Trust needed to be built. Relationships needed to be cultivated. The study participants understood that such environments are developed and improved over time. The attempt at developing a collaborative work environment should not be undertaken by a principal who is looking to make changes quickly (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991), as the creation of a collaborative working environment, when done properly, is a time consuming endeavour.

**Shared decision making.** One of the more time consuming aspects of developing and sustaining a collaborative working environment, is allocating the time for staff to come together to make shared decisions. When all staff work together to make decisions, teachers are more likely to believe in and support those decisions (Sanzo, Sherman & Clayton, 2011). In order for a collaborative work environment to be developed, principals must be willing to allow teacher

input into decision making (Goddard et al., 2007). Sharing in the decision making with one's staff can be regarding any number of topics. They could be large or small decisions. The important component is simply that the decisions are shared. This can increase the sense of personal ownership that all teachers feel in their workplace, which assists in the development of a collaborative work environment.

## **Culture**

A school culture may be defined as the shared meanings, beliefs and assumptions of the school community (Van Houtte, 2005). It encompasses the shared norms and values found in a school (Hoy & Hoy, 2003). While it is a responsibility of the principal to set the tone in the school (Leithwood & Fullan, 2012) and to work to create a positive school culture (Sindhi, 2013), this cannot be done by the principal alone. All individuals in the school, whether teachers, support staff or students, play a part in the creation and sustainment of the school culture (Kohm & Nance, 2009). Principals interviewed for this study emphasized the importance of creating and maintaining that positive school culture, and expressed their belief that the principal has a large role to play in the development of the culture of the school.

## **Strategies to Encourage Collaborative Work Environments**

There are multiple ways in which a principal can encourage the development of a collaborative working environment in his or her school. There is not a one size fits all solution. Various strategies will be used by individuals as required. A particular individual may make use of a variety of strategies in a different time or location. The elementary principals interviewed

for this study shared a number of strategies that they have found to be effective in the creation of a collaborative work environment in their respective schools.

### **Building Relationships**

A principal's relationship with his or her staff is a critical component in the development of a collaborative working environment. While a collaborative working environment could be developed without there being a positive working relationship between the principal and the staff, the likelihood of one being developed is considerably lower (Ministry of Education, 2013). In order for a school to develop into a collaborative working environment, there must be a strong foundation of relationships built, not only between the school principal and the teachers, but amongst the teachers as well (McLeskey & Waldron, 2010; Coleman, 2011; Crum, Sherman & Myran, 2010; Harris, Day, Hopkins, Hadfield, Hargreaves & Chapman, 2013). Principals explained ways in which they work to develop these relationships. The first building block of this process is developing trust.

**Developing trusting relationships.** Having trusting relationships with and amongst staff is very important when attempting to develop a collaborative working environment. Many study participants explained their belief in the value of having trusting relationships with their teachers. It was their belief that those trusting relationships were key to their ability to fulfill their role as principal. Kruse and Louis (2009) explain that a collaborative working environment in a school is not possible without trust. While principals cannot be held solely responsible for the development of these trusting relationships in their schools, they are able to set the tone and lay the foundation for positive, trusting relationships.

**Demonstrating trust.** Study participants shared ways that they demonstrate their trust to their teaching staff. One principal stated that he trusted his staff explicitly and that he often tells them that directly. Other principals stated that they demonstrated their trust of their teachers by showing their own fallibility, advocating on behalf of teachers with parents and directly responding to teachers' requests for support. These principals do not simply tell their staff that they trust them, but they demonstrate their trust through their actions. When this trust exists between the principal and the teachers in a school, a collaborative working environment is more likely to develop and thrive (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). One way that principals can demonstrate to their teaching staff that they can be trusted, is to be available to them whenever possible.

**Being available to staff.** In order to develop positive working relationships with one's staff, the principal needs to be available to them. Trust is built between the principal and the teachers when the teachers see and believe that the principal is there for them. Listening to teachers and being available when teachers need support or simply to debrief after a difficult day, is a way in which principals can work to develop the relationships required for collaborative work to flourish.

**Assisting in developing staff relationships.** Working to build relationships with and among the staff is a key part of the principal's role. Assisting the staff in developing these relationships continues throughout a principal's tenure in a school. A positive relationship with one's staff is a key building block to creating a collaborative working environment (Ministry of Education, 2013). It is not always an easy process and it is sometimes an impossible challenge. It is important for principals to work to improve relationships with and amongst their teaching

staff as having positive relationships increases the likelihood of the development of a collaborative work environment (Fullan, 2002).

## **Communication**

Communicating with one's staff, regarding both small and large issues is an important strategy that assists principals in developing and sustaining collaborative work environments in their schools. This involves a number of aspects of communication including, but not limited to, listening to teachers, communicating with teachers and filtering of information that they receive. The principal's support for the development and sustainment of a collaborative environment in their school needs to be communicated verbally and through their actions. Principals need to communicate to staff the value they place on collaboration and articulate their support for such an environment (Little, 1990).

## **Listening to Teachers**

Listening to the concerns and opinions of teachers, is an important way for principals to work to develop collaborative work environments in their schools. Principals interviewed for this study expressed their belief that being willing to listen to their teachers, and assist them in problem solving if needed, was an effective way to build a collaborative working environment. The importance of not only listening to what is being said, but also to seek clarification when required was shared. This helped to ensure understanding regarding the issues being presented. A participant shared that when he has sought clarification, teachers on his staff felt as though they were being heard and that their concerns were valid. Crum, Sherman & Myran (2010)

explain that listening and gathering input from all of their staff, is an important way to develop collaborative learning environments in schools.

### **Communicating with Teachers**

Listening to teachers and hearing their concerns is an important way in which principals can work to develop collaborative environments in their schools, but ensuring effective communication with their teachers is just as important. Almost all participants stated that they felt as though frequent communication, being good communicators, and having open communication with their teaching staff were critical aspects in developing a collaborative work environment. The communication of the principal's support of a collaborative working environment and the value they place on the effort of their staff in their role in the creation of such an environment, is important to the development of that collaborative working environment (Little, 1990).

In the previous chapter a participant shared that while she agrees with the importance of communicating with her staff, she believes that it is equally as important to facilitate dialogue from her teachers to her, as principal. This two way communication demonstrates the significance she places on ensuring her staff is being heard. It was her belief that this two way communication she engages in with her staff, creates a more collaborative work environment in her school.

**Filtering of information.** Not only must principals be prepared to communicate with their staff when developing a collaborative learning environment, the ability to filter information received is an effective strategy. Principals shared that they are bombarded with information on a daily basis and not all of it needs to be passed along to teachers, who are also dealing with

heavy workloads (Directions, 2014a). One principal explained that he often rewrites emails that arrive from the board office, into more teacher friendly language. He felt as though this reduced the stress level of his staff. Having a staff that is feeling highly stressed, is not a positive way to develop a collaborative working environment.

### **Operating from a Distributed Leadership Style**

When the leadership in the school is distributed, or shared amongst the staff, there is a greater chance that a collaborative working environment will develop. Operating from this leadership style is the most significant way that a principal can support and develop such an environment (McLeskey & Waldron, 2010). The majority of principals interviewed for the purposes of this study, felt that this was the style of leadership under which they consistently operated. The ways in which the principals demonstrate the use of this leadership style are as follows.

**Sharing decision making.** One of the key components of this leadership style is engaging one's staff in shared decision making. In the previous chapter, a study participant explained that, although he is the sole administrator in his building, he did not believe that it was "his" school. He viewed the school as belonging to all stakeholders. To demonstrate his commitment to this belief, he actively worked to share all decision making with the school staff. He wanted decision making to be shared, so everyone would own the decisions made. When all staff work together to make decisions, teachers are more likely to believe in and support those decisions (Sanzo, Sherman & Clayton, 2011).

**Sharing the workload.** The need to share in aspects of the day to day running of the school, while some may see it as a more effective way to work, can also be attributed to a

workload issue. In the last chapter, some principals expressed the challenges they face in regards to workload due to the fact that they are the only administrators in their buildings. These single administrators must rely on teacher leaders for assistance. These principals, when sharing the workload amongst teacher, are not relinquishing their formal role as administrators. It is still ultimately their responsibility to run the school. These principals are simply making use of the skills of others in their building, whose leadership abilities he or she has recognized (Harris, 2004).

**Identifying teacher leaders.** Given that principals are open to distributing leadership tasks when possible, they must first be able to identify staff members with leadership ability. Having built positive relationships with their teaching staff is an important pre-cursor to recognizing the abilities of their teachers. Principals interviewed shared that it is important for a principal to really know their staff, in order to identify those with leadership abilities. The principal must be aware of their strengths and be willing to encourage them to improve those skills. Ideally, principals will identify the leadership potential within their staff and help each individual develop their own leadership capacity (Crum, Sherman & Myran, 2010).

Leadership can present itself in a variety of ways, and if principals can recognize those various leadership abilities in their teaching staff, they will be able to share the workload in a number of ways in their school. Assisting with the development of leadership skills amongst one's staff, is a form of capacity building. Organizations will always require leaders and principals who identify and support those with leadership potential. The organizations are working to ensure there will be a pool of leaders, from which to draw in the future (Hargreaves, 2005).



### **Supports Received in the Development of a Collaborative Work Environment**

There are many people and places from which a principal is able to draw support in developing a collaborative working environment in their school. The elementary principal need not work in isolation when they are attempting to create such an environment. Principals receive support from both within their school and outside of it. This support can make the process of developing and sustaining a collaborative work environment a much easier one to undertake.

#### **Support from Within the School**

Having a supportive, trusting relationship with their teaching staff, helps in the creation of a collaborative working environment. Teachers can demonstrate this support through their participation in the development of the goals and vision for the school, which is an important aspect of the creation of a collaborative working environment (Peterson, 1994). When there is trust between the principal and the teachers, a collaborative working environment is more likely to exist (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). Study participants expressed the importance of these positive relationships with their teaching staff.

#### **Support from Within the Board**

Most principals interviewed felt supported by the Board for whom they worked and their immediate supervisory officer in particular. Feeling as though one is supported by the district is critical (Mangin, 2007). Those who expressed the highest level of support from their S.O. expressed that they were allowed some autonomy to decide the way in which aspects of their school should be run. When principals are given autonomy in their role of principal, they are more likely to offer it to their teaching staff (Eyal & Roth, 2011).

The district school board can demonstrate their support for the development and sustainment of a collaborative work environment in their schools, by providing the time and the space for teachers to work together in a collaborative manner (Directions, 2014a). This requires the provision of both tangible resources such as meeting space and funding for release time, as well as intangible ones, such as a communication of the importance of working collaboratively, when addressing school principals.

Some principals also spoke about the supports they both received and gave to their principal colleagues. Depending on where the study participant was on their professional trajectory, some principals sought assistance from colleagues most often, while others offered their support to others as mentors.

### **Support from Union**

Some principals also shared that they had received support from ETFO, whether through their own school steward or someone else in the organization. One participant explained that she has often had a good working relationship with her school steward, and it is someone with whom she attempts to work with in a collaborative manner. Positive relationships between the local union and the board are encouraged by the Ontario Leadership Framework (Institute for Education Leadership, 2013). This positive relationship can be of help to everyone in the school and it also benefits many aspects of the school and working environment. A correlation has been found between the union-administrator relationship and a positive school culture (Meredith, 2009).

## **Support from Policy**

The Ontario Ministry of Education, through its Ontario Leadership Framework, also supports the development and sustainment of a collaborative working environment in schools. It promotes a collaborative working environment and acknowledges that there are a number of ways that leaders can develop such an environment in their school. The use of collaboration is entrenched in all of the leader practices and competencies of the OLF (Institute for Education Leadership, 2013).

The Ontario College of Teachers, which governs both teachers and administrators in Ontario, includes the concept of collaboration amongst staff in a number of the Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession (Ontario College of Teachers, n.d.). These Standards of Practice provide a framework by which Ontario educators are expected to abide and use to guide their daily practice. By including the expectation that Ontario teachers will work in a collaborative manner, in those Standards of Practice, it reinforces the commitment of the Ontario education community to the concept.

## **Challenges to Collaboration**

A number of barriers to collaboration were identified by the principals interviewed for this study. Some of these challenges occur in their own schools and with their own staff, while others occur outside the building. Those challenges that principals face outside their own school, are often more difficult to overcome, as they have less control over those individuals and structures.

## Challenges within the School

The creation of a collaborative work environment can be challenged by many factors, including many within the school itself. While principals may be able to exert some control over these issues, they still act as barriers to the development of a collaborative environment.

**Teachers.** The teachers themselves can be one of the biggest barriers to the creation and sustainment of a collaborative work environment in a school. There are a number of reasons why the teaching staff may be a barrier to collaboration.

The notion that teachers will work collaboratively with other teachers is a relatively new one and a shift away from the manner in which many current teachers began their career in education. Previously teachers often worked in isolation inside their own classrooms. While there has been a relatively recent shift in Ontario away from working autonomously to working in a more collaborative manner (Leithwood & Fullan, 2012), all teachers have not shifted their individual mindsets on this topic. This was an issue raised by most principals. It was not uncommon for them to be challenged by a teacher on staff who did not wish to work with colleagues in a collaborative manner.

Again, there were multiple reasons suggested for this reluctance. Principals expressed that they did not believe that most teachers were reluctant participants simply to be difficult. They stated that perhaps the teachers had not been exposed to the benefits of working collaboratively or they had not been given sufficient professional development opportunities to understand ways to go about it. It was also suggested that some teachers had worked together for many years and functioned well by sharing ideas with a small group of colleagues. They did not see the need to expand the group with whom they worked well. There is often a group with whom they are most comfortable and they consistently seek each other out when collaboration is

required. When teachers identify more closely with a small group, rather than the larger staff, this is referred to as balkanization. This is a form of a non-collaborative culture and when this culture is in place, there is a lack of idea sharing and problem solving amongst the entire teaching staff (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991). This behaviour negatively impacts the development of a collaborative work environment in a school.

Teachers can act as barriers to collaboration when they don't get along with each other. Personality conflicts can act as a challenge to the creation of a collaborative work environment in a school, especially when the conflict exists between two (or more) teachers who would generally be expected to collaborate, such as members of a grade-alike team. Forcing teachers to work collaboratively though is not an effective strategy, as when teachers are forced to collaborate, due to a formalized structure such as working in divisions or grade teams, they may become less likely to want to engage in true collaboration (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991). One participant who has worked as a principal for many years, shared that when personality conflicts arise among her teachers, she attempts to find a teacher who is able to work with a number of groups of teachers on staff, and asks them to work as a bridge between teachers and groups. There is a risk to this strategy though as when teachers are required to participate in a coerced learning environment, the learning community will be less effective (Dickerson, 2011).

**School size.** In the previous chapter, principals expressed challenges in creating collaborative working environments due to the size of the school in which they work, whether large or small. While school size can be a factor in the development of a collaborative working environment, it is not a significant one (Kruse, Louis & Bryk, 1994). Much is dependent on the individuals working in a particular school, no matter the size.

***Small school.*** Principals shared that the challenges they faced when attempting to develop a collaborative working environment in a smaller school existed primarily because of the smaller number of teachers. When a small group of teachers work together, often any problems or attempts to make even minor changes to the way in which they work together seemed to be amplified in a small school setting. Teachers were used to working in a particular way and were not as open to reform due to their long-standing relationship and their reluctance to admit changes were needed. Smaller schools, due to the fact that there are fewer teachers, have greater challenges when attempting to schedule formalized opportunities for teachers to work together. Common planning time with grade-alike or division-alike partners may not be possible in a small school due to the lack of teachers who provide preparation time to the classroom teachers. It is quite possible that there is only one person providing that coverage; therefore, time for teachers to work together collaboratively during the instructional day is almost non-existent. When teachers are able to have common preparation time, it is more likely to result in collaborative work (Hargreaves, 1991).

***Large school.*** Principals working in larger schools who felt that the size of their school was a barrier to collaboration, were largely referring to the time that is required to touch base with and interact with all of their teaching staff. It was seen to be a challenge to find the time to build relationships with everyone, and to assist in building collaboration. The ability to develop positive relationships between the administrator and the teaching staff, increases the likelihood of a collaborative work environment being developed and sustained (Ministry of Education, 2013). If the principal is unable to foster positive relationships with their teachers, their ability to create a collaborative work environment is reduced.

Another challenge faced when attempting to develop a collaborative work environment in a larger school was attempting to get everyone to agree on common goals and a common vision for learning and working together. While it is ideal, it may be unrealistic to think that over 50 teachers will have the same ideas and want to work towards the same goals. An attempt should at least be made to involve teachers in the decision making and goal setting process, as when they are involved in these processes, teachers are more likely to believe in and support those decisions (Sanzo, Sherman & Clayton, 2011). At best one might hope that even if a teacher does not agree with the decisions made, they will at least support them publicly.

### **Lack of Time**

The lack of time principals and teachers have to work together during the school day and school year could arguably be seen as a challenge within the school or one that comes from outside. While the scheduling difficulties, such as finding ways to offer common preparation time, or the reduction in time for PLC's, may manifest themselves in the schools on a day to day basis, the reason for this lack of available time really comes down to funding. For these issues to be rectified, the Ministry of Education would need to fund the schools at a higher level. More teachers available to provide preparation time would mean a larger portion of the Education budget would need to go to teacher salaries. In order for there to be PLC's during the school day, release time is needed for teachers. That would require the hiring of daily occasional teachers for those days, which again would require an increase in funding. The district school board could demonstrate its commitment to collaborative work environments through the allocation of funds in this manner (Directions, 2014a).

At a school level though, the lack of time to work and learn together does impact the ability of the principal to develop and sustain a collaborative work environment. Time is needed for staff to be able to work together on a consistent basis, and it is only effective when it is built into the school schedule and annual calendar (Kruse, Louis & Bryk, 1994). This time together should happen on a regular basis and it needs to be sustained time, not simply one period here and there (Raywid, 1993).

### **Outside Challenges to Collaboration**

Some challenges to the development of a collaborative working environment are found outside the school building itself. They involve other stakeholders in the educational community. These challenges are less likely to be able to be overcome by the school principal, as many of these barriers are outside of the control of the principal.

#### **Parents**

Parents play an increasingly large role in their children's education. This can mean that they also wish to become more involved in the decision making processes in schools and day to day workings of the classroom. This can be a challenge for school staff when attempting to work collaboratively as an instructional team. The goals and opinions of the parents, when it comes to their children and their education, may be in direct conflict with those of the teaching staff and the principal. Teachers and principals have little control over the actions of parents. When difficult issues arise, they are often escalated beyond the scope of the school principal, with the superintendent becoming involved.



## Teacher Unions

While the involvement of teacher unions, such as ETFO, is encouraged by the Ontario Leadership Framework (Institute for Education Leadership, 2012), they can also be seen by principals as a barrier to collaboration. This is most often mentioned in regards to times of labour unrest. In the previous chapter one participant shared that ETFO can be a consistent barrier to collaboration in her school, as the expectations set out in the collective agreement, in regards to issues such as preparation time and lunch breaks, can make it difficult to arrange and offer professional development to her staff. While this may be seen by some as ETFO being the barrier to collaboration, as they are often the ones who are called to enforce these collective agreement provisions, it should be noted that the school board is also a signatory to those agreements and is equally responsible for their enforcement.

**Regulation 274.** Some principals interviewed for this study viewed ETFO as the reason behind the development of Regulation 274 in Ontario schools. This regulation instigated a variety of changes to the hiring model for teachers in Ontario, including implementing defined seniority hiring and limiting principal choice when selecting candidates for interviews. The intention was to create a more transparent hiring process. Although some principals interviewed were under the impression that this Regulation was developed at the insistence of ETFO, it was actually a result of government negotiations with the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA), not ETFO. Once agreed to by one affiliate, it became part of all subsequent teacher agreements with every teacher affiliate in Ontario (Directions, 2014b).

## **Ways to Improve Collaborative Working Environments in Schools**

In the previous chapter, principals interviewed for this study shared a number of suggestions regarding ways in which collaborative working environments in schools could be improved. These ideas were varied. Some of these suggestions could be implemented by principals, as they deal with issues that are within their control, while others would require input from either the school board or the Ministry of Education.

### **School Level**

Some aspects of improving the development and sustainment of a collaborative working environment, fall within the ability of the elementary school principal to improve. One such possibility for increasing the likelihood of creating a collaborative work environment is teacher timetabling. While principals are of course dependent on staffing levels provided to them by the district school board, they do have some flexibility in the creation of the schedule. Within the bounds of collective agreements, some changes in the way planning time subjects, such as physical education or music are managed, is one possible way to increase the likelihood of teachers having time during the school day to work together (Khorsheed, 2007).

**Common preparation time.** The ability to offer common preparation time to grade-alike teams was a suggestion given by principals. Their ability to do so would increase if the funding model were altered. Currently the staffing levels allocated to each school often do not allow principals enough flexibility to be able to offer common preparation time. In some schools, there is only one person providing preparation time coverage to the rest of the teaching staff. They are unable to cover two classes at once. In other schools there may be multiple prep teachers, but they may not be in the school at the same time. Therefore again, it is impossible for

two teachers to have common preparation time. The difficulty in being able to do so varied by school. Principals in smaller schools did not have multiple classes in the same grade so were therefore unable to do this, no matter the circumstances.

**Creative solutions.** In order to work around the lack of grade-alike teams in schools, or the lack of common preparation times, principals interviewed have demonstrated creativity in finding solutions. One principal interviewed explained that he offers his teachers the opportunity to attend a nearby school to work with a grade-alike teacher for a condensed amount of time. The funds for this release time comes directly from the school budget. Peterson (1994) explained that principals are in the unique position to be able to assist teachers in finding the time to work together collaboratively. Given sufficient budget to be able to do so, principals would likely be able to implement more creative solutions, allowing for the time for teachers to work collaboratively.

### **District Level**

There are ways in which the district school board could increase the likelihood that their schools become collaborative working environments. Simply communicating that support to principals is a first step in the process of creating such environments (Mangin, 2007). Allocating time and resources to individual schools, allowing teachers the opportunity to work together in a collaborative way, is another manner that the district could demonstrate their support (Directions, 2014a). While the Ministry of Education ultimately controls the funds that the school board receives, a school board could make collaborative working environments a priority in their budget process.

**Allocation of school budgets.** A recommendation mentioned by nearly all principals in this study, was the need for larger budgets. Greater funding at the school level would allow for more release time for teachers. More release time could be used to fund meetings during the school day, where staff could work collaboratively and engage in school directed professional learning.

**Time.** While many school priorities are decided at a provincial level, the school board could make some changes which would allow more time for teachers to work together in a collaborative way. Although provincial priorities are often mandated to school boards regarding professional learning, the way in which it is interpreted is often left to the board level. More time during Professional Activity (P.A.) days or staff meetings, whose length and number are determined provincially, could be offered to teachers to work collaboratively.

**Greater principal autonomy.** Nearly all principals interviewed shared that allowing them greater autonomy in their building to determine the learning needs of their teachers and students, would increase the likelihood of a collaborative working environment being developed at their schools. They expressed that they knew their teachers best and would best be able to decide what initiatives their teaching staff should undertake. If given the opportunity, they felt as though they would be able to nurture the development of a collaborative work environment in their school, through school specific initiatives. This ability to choose the direction of their schools' professional learning needs, is a decision that could be made at the district level. Allowing principals greater autonomy in their role as administrator, would allow them to encourage the same autonomy in their teaching staff (Eyal & Roth, 2011). Most teachers and principals know what needs to be done in order to create a collaborative work environment in their school. They just need the time and resources to be able to do so.

**Teacher movement.** Multiple principals shared that having the ability to facilitate teacher movement between schools when required, would allow them the ability to develop a more collaborative working environment. Teachers who do not wish to work collaboratively or who are experiencing personality conflicts with others, would be given the opportunity to change schools. Ideally, those individuals would find a location where there was a better fit for their teaching style and personality. The ability to do so is limited in most schools, by the collective agreement in place in each board/federation local, therefore this change could be made by the district school board, in consultation with the union. In the previous chapter, one principal explained that teachers being able to go another school and work with new people, may reduce the risk of balkanization, as described earlier (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991).

### **Ministry Level**

Some solutions to the improvement of developing and sustaining collaborative working environments are larger than the school or the district school board. Changes will need to occur on a province-wide level.

**Allocation of funds.** As mentioned previously, while school boards control the flow of funds to individual schools, the amount received by the district as a whole is determined by the Ontario government. While there is policy in place, such as the OLF, that emphasizes the Ministry of Education's belief in creating collaborative work environments in schools, the budget does not always reflect that. If teachers are to have greater opportunities to work together during the school day, there either needs to be a larger complement of staff allocated to a school, allowing for more preparation time or at minimum more common preparation time, or there

needs to be greater funding allocated to the hiring of occasional teachers. These funds would be used to release permanent teachers during the school day to work together.

**Time.** The suggestion given most frequently by principals, regarding how collaborative working environments in schools could be improved was to give them more time. The ideas regarding how to get more time to work together were varied. Some of the suggestions offered could only be implemented if changes were made at a provincial level.

**Additional P.A. days.** The proposals offered included a greater number of P.A. days in the school year or simply a reallocation of their function. Currently two P.A. days per year are teacher directed for student assessment and reporting. This was a relatively recent change to the use of those PA days. While a principal noted that these were worthwhile uses for the time, he explained how that was two fewer days that were now available for him to meet with his staff. In the time since the interviews were conducted, the Ministry of Education did add a P.A. day to the school year, with a focus both on Health and Safety and on Ministry Initiatives.

**Preparation Time.** Whether the focus is on teachers having more preparation time in a week, or on simply having the ability to have common preparation time among grade or division teams, the solution lies with the Ontario Ministry of Education. The amount of preparation time is determined through province-wide collective bargaining with the teacher unions; therefore, any changes would not be able to be made at the school or district level. A greater ability to allow for more common preparation time in a school would in most cases require more staff. Staffing allocations are given to the board by the Ministry, therefore changes in student to teacher ratio would have to be a provincial decision.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

This study examined how principals develop collaborative working environments in their schools. It explored the principal's understanding of a collaborative working environment. It also investigated the strategies principals use to develop these environments and the supports they receive in doing so. Finally, it examined the challenges principals face when creating a collaborative work environment in their school. Eleven elementary school principals were interviewed and they shared their experiences, both positive and negative, in developing collaborative working environments in their respective schools. The study participants also offered suggestions for improving their ability to develop collaborative working environments in their schools.

### **The Research Question**

How do principals develop collaborative work environments? There are many facets to answering this question and there are multiple ways that principals undertake this important task.

#### **How do principals understand collaborative work?**

Principals view collaborative work in their school first and foremost as working together as a group of professionals in the school. These professionals are working towards being effective educators and learners. School staff, which includes all administrators, teachers and support staff, work as one team.

**Common goals.** In a collaborative work environment, teachers, in conjunction with the principal, will have developed common goals. The principal will not select the goals in isolation, but will assist in the process of developing those goals and facilitate their development. This can

be a challenging exercise, and everyone will not always agree, but the selection and undertaking of common goals is needed in order for the school to become a collaborative work environment.

**Common vision.** When the work environment is a collaborative one, school staff have ideally developed a common vision for the school. There are also common goals that the staff wish to achieve. This vision and these goals have been developed with input from everyone. This is unfortunately not always the case in schools, but is viewed as the ideal collaborative working environment by principals.

**Shared decision making.** Shared decision making is a critical aspect of principals' vision of a collaborative working environment. When there are decisions to be made that affect the working or learning environment in the school, everyone has input into those decisions. The principal is not the sole decision maker in the building.

**Shared learning.** Finally given the fact that schools are primarily institutions of learning, shared learning is a key aspect of collaborative working environments in schools. One of the primary roles of the principal is to be an instructional leader. They strive to learn alongside their teaching staff. When a school is a collaborative work environment, everyone is learning together and is working to increase their efficacy as teachers.

### **What strategies do principals use to encourage collaborative work environments?**

Principals engage in a number of strategies in their schools to encourage collaborative work environments. There are a variety of strategies mentioned, as different principals will engage in an assortment of strategies. One principal may have even found differing strategies to be effective at certain times or in certain locations.



**Relationship building.** In order to assist in the development of collaborative work environments, principals spend a considerable amount of time building relationships with their staff. This process takes time. Positive working relationships can take years to develop. These relationships require consistent effort to maintain, no matter the number of years that a principal has been in a particular school.

**Communication.** Ways in which principals work to build those positive relationships with staff include initiating and encouraging communication with their teachers. Principals explained that regular communication with their staff is important to them, whether that be formal or informal. Some spoke of daily emails with their staff, while others sent weekly updates with key information to everyone in the school.

Communication from their staff was also mentioned as a way in which positive relationships are built with their teachers. Principals shared the importance of being available to their staff when they were needed. The topics of communication from their staff varied, but often served as a way for teachers and support staff to debrief about their day or challenging situations which they encountered both personally and professionally.

**Listening to staff.** That willingness to listen to those challenges that the members of the principals' staff faced on a day to day basis encouraged the development of positive working relationships between the principals and their staff. The ability to listen and offer assistance when needed was a key strategy mentioned by those principals interviewed for this study. People available to listen when needed and assist with problem solving solutions deepened the relationship between principal and teacher and helped to create the conditions needed for a collaborative working environment to develop. The principals offered that often teachers were not looking for solutions, simply for someone to be a listening ear.

**Support.** Offering support, both verbally and in a concrete manner is a way in which principals work to encourage the development of collaborative work environments. This support manifests itself in a number of ways, from simply telling staff that they are supported to demonstrating it when meeting with parents or offering funding and/or release time to support initiatives spearheaded by the teacher. Principals also offer support to their staff by creating links amongst them, and encouraging collaboration in areas that are important or of interest to their staff members.

**Developing a positive school culture.** Building those positive relationships with their school staff and demonstrating to them that they were willing to be a good communicator and listener assisted in the use of another strategy mentioned by principals. While it cannot be done by the principal alone, the creation of a positive school culture and a safe space for all is an important strategy in the development of a collaborative working environment in schools. The creation of a positive school culture does take the cooperation and work of all school stakeholders, but the principal is able to set the tone for this endeavour and plays an essential part in its development.

**Information filtering.** Finally, one strategy shared by principals when asked about how they encourage collaborative work environments in their schools is the filtering of information. On a given day any number of messages could arrive on the principal's desk from a variety of sources, including but not limited to, the Board, their superintendent and the Ministry. Principals interviewed understood that this information, if simply passed along to their teachers, could be seen as overwhelming. They shared that they often filter the material, only sharing with their staff what is essential. Sometimes they even rewrite the messages, in order to make them more reader friendly.

### **What facilitates and supports principals to develop a collaborative work environment?**

There are a number of avenues of support available to principals as they work to develop a collaborative working environment in their schools. Some of those supports are accessible to them right in their own building, while others can be found further afield.

**Teacher leaders.** Principals encouraged the use of teacher leaders on staff in order to assist in developing and sustaining a collaborative working environment in their schools. They expressed that there are many types of leaders to be found amongst the staff, and those people are often willing to step up and help when needed. Some of the leadership roles that offer assistance when required are more formalized, such as the ETFO steward in the building, while others are teacher leaders who are able to help in any number of ways, such as coaching or assisting with professional learning sessions.

**Other administrators.** Principal colleagues were mentioned as a support mechanism for the study participants. While those at both ends of the experience spectrum equally valued their colleagues as a way in which to get support, they were not necessarily used in the same way. A relatively new administrator shared that she often called on other principals when she was unsure of a decision that needed to be made in her school. Their assistance would often reassure her that she was proceeding properly. A more experienced principal explained that he often acted as a mentor for newer administrators, helping them along in their leadership journey.

**Board level support.** Support from the Board, which generally refers to senior administration, was frequently mentioned by principals in this study. They spoke positively about the work being done and felt as though the Board was more receptive to their concerns and ideas in recent years. Support from their individual Supervisory Officer was also felt by the

principals. While levels of support varied, the majority of principals shared that they did feel supported.

### **What challenges do principals experience when trying to create a collaborative work environment?**

A number of challenges were identified by principals as barriers to creating a collaborative work environment in their school. Some of the challenges existed in their own school buildings, while others were from a variety of outside sources.

**School size.** One commonly shared challenge was the size of the school. Principals who worked in schools of all sizes mentioned this challenge. Those in larger schools felt as though it was difficult to have individual relationships with all of their staff members. They also felt that developing those relationships between teachers was a challenge. Often in larger schools there are pockets of teachers who work together consistently and are reluctant to work with others. The ability to come to agreement in regards to any number of issues, including the goals and visions for the school, can be more challenging with a greater number of teachers in a school. There are a greater number of ideas and opinions to be shared.

Principals of small schools shared frustrations as well. One principal of a smaller school explained that traditions and routines are highly ingrained in the school culture. It can be a challenge for an administrator to even suggest small changes, as those are often not viewed favourably by the staff. Teachers in smaller schools may have fewer opportunities to work collaboratively in a formalized way, as they are less likely to have common preparation time or grade-alike partners.

**Uncooperative staff.** No matter the school size, principals shared that a challenge to the creation of a collaborative working environment can be staff members themselves. Often there are teachers who do not wish to work collaboratively with their colleagues. They prefer to do things their own way and work independently. While that is difficult in and of itself, some principals described teachers on staff who actively encouraged other teachers not to work towards developing a collaborative environment. This is just one example of one of the many personality conflicts that can be a challenges to encouraging a collaborative working environment.

**Staff conflict.** Personality conflicts among staff are common. Teachers who are expected to work in close proximity, such as grade-alike partners, do not always get along. This can be a barrier to creating a collaborative working environment. While the principal can work to improve those relationships between members of his or her school staff, this is not always possible. The principal may not be able to improve that working relationship.

**Time.** The most frequently mentioned challenge to the creation of a collaborative working environment by principals, is the lack of time. This includes time to meet with staff, both as a group and individually. This also refers to the myriad of duties that he or she as principal must undertake and the inability to finish them all. Sometimes the work required to create a collaborative working environment is just another project to add to one's already large list.

**Parents.** Challenges to the creation of a collaborative work environment come from outside of the school as well. Parents were mentioned as a potential stumbling block. Parental involvement and their desire to control what is occurring in the classroom was seen as a barrier to collaboration in schools.

**Government.** Government, via the Ministry of Education, intervention in the form of Regulation 274, which limited teacher mobility and enshrined teacher hiring practices in legislation was viewed as a barrier to the creation of collaborative work environments by principals. Principals were no longer able to hire those teacher whom they felt would best work with their staff. They were now required to abide by seniority rules regarding who could be interviewed and ultimately hired to their school.

**Unions.** The teacher federation, ETFO, was seen as a hindrance to the creation of collaborative working environments by principals. The rules laid out in collective agreements, regarding such things as meeting times and preparation time could limit the principal's ability to work collaboratively with their staff. It was shared that the rigidity of the expectations laid out in the collective agreement, made it more difficult to come up with creative solutions regarding challenges such as timetabling and the scheduling of professional learning. The perceived involvement by ETFO in the creation of the above mentioned Regulation 274 was also viewed negatively.

### **Research Contributions**

This research study regarding how principals develop collaborative working environments and the ways in which they do so, contributed to our understanding of the topic of collaborative working environments in a number of ways. Described below are ways in which the findings of this study contributed to practice, theory and policy.

## Contributions to Practice

The findings of this research study suggest a number of ways in which the practice of principals can contribute to the development of a collaborative working environment in their schools.

**Distributed leadership.** The use of a distributed style of leadership by principals, which involves sharing aspects of leadership with the staff, is more likely to result in a collaborative working environment in a school. When teachers feel as though their opinions and contributions are wanted and valued, they are more likely to support the move towards greater collaboration in their working environment.

**Autonomy.** In order for principals to maximize the use of a distributed leadership style in their schools, they must be offered a greater level of autonomy in their daily practice. Principals are on the ground in schools and they know their staff and their needs better than anyone else. Allowing them the opportunity to make decisions regarding all aspects of the daily running of the school, including such things as staffing, budgetary allocation, school improvement planning and required professional learning for teachers, would improve the collaborative working environments in their schools.

**Support.** The research findings also show that when principals demonstrate their support for the teachers in their buildings, a collaborative environment is more likely to develop. That demonstrated support can manifest itself in a number of ways, from verbal offers of support to concrete offerings such as more release time to pursue a project. Principals who are able to offer support in a variety of ways to their teaching staff will develop and sustain more positive and more collaborative working environments.

## **Contributions to Policy**

Findings from this research study indicate that there are ways in which education policy could be altered in order to improve the collaborative working environment found in elementary schools.

**Fewer initiatives.** There exist hundreds of Ministry of Education and Board level initiatives that impact elementary schools in Ontario. Having a more streamlined approach and a greater alignment, not only between Ministry and Board initiatives but also filtering down to the school level could improve the collaborative working environment in schools. Principals are overwhelmed by the number of initiatives that they must introduce to their staff and feel as though they are often working at cross purposes and do not meet the needs of their staff or students.

**Greater principal autonomy.** As a follow up to the notion of fewer initiatives in schools, principals would be more successful at developing collaborative working environments if they were able to choose the projects and initiatives that best fit the needs of their schools. Greater focus and teacher buy-in regarding professional learning that held meaning for them would result in a more positive, collaborative working environment.

**Changes to Regulation 274.** Allowing principals the ability to hire the candidate who best matches the needs of their school could result in more collaborative schools. Currently principals are required to interview and hire the most senior candidates, and are not able to consider individual school needs in the hiring process.

**Greater funding.** Larger school budgets would increase the ability of principals to develop and sustain collaborative work environments. This greater funding could allow for more release time for teachers to work together as well as allow the principal more flexibility in



designing professional learning that meets the needs of his or her particular staff. More funding allocated to schools in the Board budget might also allow for the hiring of more administrators, allowing for more than one administrator per school site. If this were the case, principals would have more time available to them to work collaboratively with the teachers on their staff and to engage in professional learning along with them.

### **Contributions to Theory**

This research study was a confirmation of the idea that the use of the distributed leadership theory as a means to develop collaborative working environments in schools was an effective one. Schools whose principals demonstrate the ideals of this leadership theory, such as the use of shared decision making and sharing leadership amongst the staff, are more likely to be collaborative working environments.

Previous research in this area focused on the effects of a collaborative school environment on student achievement. This research study attempted to show how principals can develop and sustain collaborative work environments and what can be done to support and facilitate these school environments. The intent was not to examine the topic of collaborative work environments from a student achievement perspective but from the perspective of the principals working in the schools.

### **Further Research**

Further research on the topic of how principals develop collaborative working environments in schools, could examine a number of related topics.

### **Principal Workload**

Given the high number of elementary schools with single administrators, a future direction for research could examine whether the use of teacher leaders in schools that are collaborative has any effect on principal workload. Are principals better served when leading a school that is a collaborative work environment?

### **Effect on Teachers**

Future research in the area of collaborative work environments in schools could examine the effect on teachers when they work in such an environment. Do teachers who work in schools with collaborative working environments experience higher levels of well-being? How does the level of collaboration in a school play a role in teacher turnover?

### **Student Achievement**

While not a focus of this research study, future research could involve an investigation concerning how student achievement is affected, as a result of their attendance at a school that is a collaborative working environment? Is student achievement affected in a negative or a positive manner due to this working environment?

### **Summary**

The final chapter of this dissertation summarized the findings for the four research sub-questions initially presented; principals' understanding of collaborative work; strategies principals use to encourage collaborative work environments; the factors that facilitate and support principals' development of such environments and the challenges principals face when attempting to create collaborative work environments in their schools. Principals who were interviewed also put forward ideas regarding ways in which collaborative work environments could be improved in their schools. This chapter also offered contributions to practice, policy and theory that could be recommended as a result of this research. Finally, suggestions for future research in the area of collaborative work environment were proposed.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your career up to this point?
2. What is your understanding of a collaborative working environment? How would you describe it?
3. In what ways do you think your school has a collaborative working environment? Why? Why not?
4. How do you as an individual work to create a collaborative working environment in your school?
5. What strategies would you share with other administrators, in order to assist them in developing a collaborative working environment?

(Probes: Trust, Relationship Building, Leadership Style, Shared Decision Making, Capacity Building, Setting Conditions, Walkthroughs, Gathering Information, Scheduling)

6. Do you see benefits to a collaborative working environment in your school? If so, what are they?
7. What challenges have you faced in developing a collaborative working environment in your school?

(Probes: Culture, Isolation, Coercion)

8. What changes would you like to make, in order to improve the collaborative working environment in your school?

9. What needs to be in place for a collaborative working environment to develop and thrive?

(Probes: Policy, Staffing, Support from S.O., Support from Union)

10. Is there anything else you would like to add?

11. Do you have any colleagues that you feel would meet the criteria for participation in this study?

## Appendix B: Research Ethics Review Board Approval



**Western  
Research**

Research Ethics

### Western University Health Science Research Ethics Board NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Katina Pollock

**Department & Institution:** Education\Faculty of Education, Western University

**NMREB File Number:** 106698

**Study Title:** Collaborative work environments: Development and sustainability

**Sponsor:**

**NMREB Initial Approval Date:** June 02, 2015

**NMREB Expiry Date:** June 02, 2016

#### Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Instruments	Draft Interview Questions	2025/04/25
Recruitment Items	Recruitment Letter	2025/04/25
Other	Email script for setting up interview dates/times/locations.	2015/04/06
Western University Protocol		2015/04/30
Revised Letter of Information & Consent		2015/05/25

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.



Chair or delegated board member

#### Ethics Officer to Contact for Further Information

<input type="checkbox"/> Erika Basile ebasile@uwo.ca	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Grace Kelly grace.kelly@uwo.ca	<input type="checkbox"/> Mina Mekhail mmekhail@uwo.ca	<input type="checkbox"/> Vikki Tran vikki.tran@uwo.ca
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*This is an official document. Please retain the original in your files.*

**Appendix C: Letter of Information and Consent Form****LETTER OF INFORMATION**

Principal Investigator:  
Dr. Katina Pollock



Student:  
Christy Thompson

**Introduction**

My name is Christy Thompson and I am a Doctoral student at the Faculty of Education at Western University. I am currently conducting research into collaborative working environments in elementary schools and would like to invite you to participate in this study.

**Purpose of the study**

The aims of this study are to conduct one hour, semi-structured interviews with elementary principals to determine how they develop and sustain collaborative working environments in their schools.

**If you agree to participate**

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to participate in a one hour in person interview at a time, date and location that is convenient for you. The interview will be recorded using an audio recording device. If you do not wish to be audio recorded you should not agree to participate in this research study.

**Confidentiality**

The information collected will be used for research purposes only, and neither your name nor information which could identify you will be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. All information collected for the study will be kept confidential. Names of participants will not be used in data analysis and any quotations or findings reported will not be linked directly to an individual's name.

At the end of the study, data will be stored on a secured office desktop for the required period of time of five years. After five years, electronic data will be overwritten using an appropriate secure deletion program and paper records shredded.

**Risks & Benefits**

There are no known risks to participating in this research study.

**Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time.

**Questions**

If you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant you may contact the Office of Research Ethics, Western University at [REDACTED]. If you have any questions about this study, please contact Christy Thompson at [REDACTED] or Dr. Katina Pollock at [REDACTED].

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Christy Thompson  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

*Collaborative work environments: Development and sustainability*

*Christy Thompson, Ed.D. Student, Western University*

CONSENT FORM

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I give consent to be audio recorded during this study. If you do not wish to be audio recorded you should not participate in this study.

Name (please print):

Signature:

Date:

Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:

Date:

The extra copy of this signed and dated consent form is for you to keep.



*Collaborative work environments: Development and sustainability*

*Christy Thompson, Ed.D. Student, Western University*

CONSENT FORM

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I give consent to be audio recorded during this study. If you do not wish to be audio recorded you should not participate in this study.

Name (please print):

Signature:

Date:

Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:

Date:

The extra copy of this signed and dated consent form is for you to keep.

### **Appendix D: Email Script**

The following is the email script sent to potential interview participants.

**Dear Elementary Principals,**

**My name is Christy Thompson. I am a teacher in KPR and a Doctoral student in the Faculty of Education at Western University. I am conducting a study called “Collaborative work environments: Development and sustainability”. The aim of this study is to collect information regarding effective practices for developing collaborative work environments in elementary schools. I am looking for elementary principals to participate in this study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may terminate your involvement in the study at any time, without consequence.**

**I am seeking participation from principals who have been in the role for a minimum of 3 years, and who have spent more than 1 year at their current work location. Your participation would involve a one hour, semi-structured interview. The interview would be audio recorded and it would take place at a mutually convenient date, time and location.**

**If you would be interested in participating in this study, or for more information, I invite you to contact me by phone at [REDACTED] or by email at [REDACTED]**

## Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Christy Thompson

**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:** The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada  
2013-2016 (Ed.D. Candidate)

Nipissing University  
North Bay, Ontario, Canada  
2005-2010 M.Ed.  
(Curriculum Studies)

Brock University  
St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada  
1996-2000 B.A. /B.Ed.  
(Child Studies/Primary Junior Education)

**Related Work Experience:** Ontario Certified Teacher  
Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board  
2000 – Present

First Vice-President (Released Officer)  
Kawartha Pine Ridge ETFO Local  
2014-2015